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# ITINERARI

LX

## RECOGNITION OF LIFE Theoretical, Ethical and Political Perspectives

Edited by

Stefania Achella, Francesca Forlè, Roberto Mordacci

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# HOW TO DEAL WITH RECOGNITION?

## Theoretical and Practical Analyses

Recognition has been a key notion in the modern and contemporary philosophical debate under many different aspects. From classic modern philosophers, such as Rousseau, Smith, or Hegel, to more contemporary scholars, such as Honneth or Forst, the issue of recognition has been investigated with regard to the constitution of one's identity in relation to others, with a specific attention to the social and moral implications of such a process. In this framework, not just the successful forms of recognition, but also all forms of non-recognition, turn out to be philosophically interesting in order to investigate the constitution of the identity of a subject. Obviously, the subject whose identity is (at least partially) constituted by means of recognition can be not just the individual human being, but also a community, a social class, or a culture, so that the issue of recognition acquires several possibilities of application also in the political theory debate.

In this sense, recognition does not involve just the issue of the relation among subjects but more generally the issue of social practices and that of concrete life processes that are embedded in concrete practices of everyday life. If we conceive of *forms of life* as those structures that pre-exist individuals and that shape and bind the possibilities of one's action, the attitude of recognition becomes a fundamental aspect in order to devise inclusive and welcoming forms of life. In this framework, there is also room for forms of recognition that are in place not just between humans but also between human beings and non-human ones (non-human living beings or artificial beings).

The aim of this special issue of *Itinerari* is promoting the philosophical investigation into the notion of recognition from different points of view, from the theoretical-historical perspective to the cognitive one, from the ethical point of view to the political one.

The papers collected in this volume lead – through original and largely unexplored paths and in the light of the most recent reflection on issues related to social injustice, intolerance, environmental and gender issues – to the need to redefine and rethink the concept of recognition, making it

interact with that of form of life. These essays thus make it possible, on the one hand, to reconstruct the most recent philosophical ways in which the notion of recognition is used, and, on the other hand, to understand how such a notion can be applied in the field of ethical and political relations, in short, in the practical field.

The volume is divided into three sections.

The first section, *(Re)Thinking Recognition*, collects historical-theoretical analyses of the notion of “recognition” and “life” (Anzalone, Cicerchia, Higgins, Laitinen, Testa). In this section, the papers by Higgins, Laitinen and Testa highlight crucial theoretical aspects of recognition by inquiring recognition as “an existentials of being human” (Higgins), by investigating the ambivalent nature of recognition (Laitinen), and by focusing on the dimension of “natural recognition, understood as a primary level of cognitive interaction” (Testa). The papers by Anzalone and Cicerchia combine historical and theoretical perspectives by focusing on Adam Smith’s notion of recognition and its relation to mimesis and fiction (Anzalone) and on a materialist critique to Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition (Cicerchia).

The second section, *Mind and Recognition*, includes contributions interested in the issue from neuroscientific, psychological and phenomenological perspectives (Donise, Forlè, Songhorian, Staiti). The articles of this section investigate, on the one hand, recognition in relation to one of its grounding capacities, i.e. empathy (Donise, Songhorian); on the other hand, they investigate some phenomenological aspects of recognition both of oneself as an embodied person (Forlè) and of others in the specific case of tolerance (Staiti).

Finally, the third section, *Acting Recognition*, contains ethical-political analyses (Achella, Donatelli, Højme, Koskinen, Manchisi, Mordacci, Pierosara, Povinelli, Qian Qian). The articles of this section question the moral roots of recognition, both in a positive and in a critical key. In the latter direction, several authors have highlighted unresolved issues by seeking new perspectives on intersubjective recognition, in relation to non-human living beings or to artificial beings.

The challenges to recognition are examined in different ways. Piergiorgio Donatelli presents an overall understanding of the relation between life and ethics in the light of recognition; the relation of humans to other living beings and the environment, interpreted as a relation of recognition, is studied by Roberto Mordacci and Armando Manchisi, offering an expansion of, respectively, the principle of respect and the idea of a good life; Silvia Pierosara interprets recognition as a moral principle, fostering the

human capacity to criticize and change; Stefania Achella offers an analysis of Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* in order to explore the women's claim to recognition in contemporary society; Elizabeth A. Povinelli examines a case of unequal distribution of power in the fight for recognition; analogously Ng Qian Qian questions the relation between recognition and reconciliation in a case of an oppressive social context. Forms of protest, such as blues music (Heikki Koskinen) or riots (Philip Højme) are inquired as legitimate practices aiming at recognition in conditions of oppression.

On the whole, the three sections try to offer an updated and articulated overview of the current debate on recognition. The concept is alive and well, and is more and more used in new directions and along original lines of development, keeping a strong hold to the more elaborated theories proposed in the modern age, especially from Kant and Hegel to Honneth.

We would like to thank all the authors for having participated and offered a wide-ranging overview of this topic, and we hope that this special issue will contribute to building further debate on a subject that never ceases to question human beings in their relations to other human and non-human beings.

Milan/Naples, September 2021  
Stefania Achella, Francesca Forlè, Roberto Mordacci



## SECTION 1

### *(RE)THINKING RECOGNITION*



# THE RECOGNITIVE MANIFOLD: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO NATURAL RECOGNITION AND ITS SUBPERSONAL LAYERS

Italo Testa

## *Abstract*

In this paper I will introduce the notion of ‘natural recognition’, understood as a primary level of recognitive interaction which belongs to our form of life, and which I articulate through the notions of ‘first’ and ‘second nature’. I will then adopt a reconstructive approach and develop a theoretical framework for interdisciplinary research on the ‘recognitive manifold’. Here I will argue that recognitive phenomena are multileveled, multilayered, and multidimensional. I will then focus on the subpersonal layer of recognition, distinguish between its ‘material’, ‘functional’, and ‘phenomenal’ aspects, and I will analyse the role this layer plays for the recognitive constitution of personhood. From this vantage point I will analyse the notion of ‘embodied recognition’, assessing the constitutive role played by the subpersonal layer of the body – both in a genetically-causal and structural sense – as for recognitive phenomena. Habit makes intelligible the relation between the different senses of embodiment and how they relate to subpersonal processes. On this basis I will argue that habit is the fundamental socio-ontological operator for a theory of embodied recognition.

*Keywords:* Recognition, Embodiment, Second Nature, Habit.

## 1. *Overview*

In this paper I will introduce the notion of ‘natural recognition’ (section 2), understood as a primary level of recognitive interaction which belongs to our form of life, and which I articulate through the notions of ‘first’ and ‘second nature’. I will then adopt a reconstructive approach, and develop a theoretical framework for interdisciplinary research on the ‘recognitive manifold’ (section 3). Here I will argue that recognitive phenomena are *multileveled* – distinguishing between ‘foreground’ (reflective, conscious) and ‘background’ (prereflective, unconscious) ones. Recognitive phenomena develop in a *multistage* manner both in phylogenesis and ontogenesis. And they are *multilayered* (I distinguish between ‘subpersonal’, ‘intra-per-

sonal’, ‘interpersonal’, ‘institutional’ layers), and *multidimensional* (I distinguish between ‘identifying’, ‘axiological’, ‘cooperative’, and ‘deontic’ dimensions). I will then focus (section 4) on the subpersonal layer of recognition, distinguish between its ‘material’, ‘functional’, and ‘phenomenal’ aspects, and I will analyze the role this layer plays in the recognitive constitution of personhood.

From this vantage point I will analyze (section 5) the notion of ‘embodied recognition’, assessing the constitutive role played by the subpersonal layer of the body – both in a genetically-causal and structural sense – as for recognitive phenomena. Habit makes intelligible the relation between the different senses of embodiment and how they relate to subpersonal processes. Moreover, the notion of habit makes intelligible the relation between subpersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal layers, and accounts for some of the stage-like aspects of the developmental processes of recognitive interaction. On this basis I will argue that habit is the fundamental socio-ontological operator for a theory of embodied recognition.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *Natural Recognition and Life-Form*

A basic tenet of classical recognition theory – for instance, in Hegel’s account in the *Self-Consciousness* chapter and in Mead’s lectures on *Mind, Self, and Society* – is that reflective self-consciousness, both as theoretical and practical robust first person stand point which characterizes human personhood, is constituted by processes of reciprocal recognition. This is both in the sense that it emerges from recognitive interactions embedded within natural life and not yet reflectively self-conscious – such as the sensorimotor activity of desire within the circle of life by Hegel, and the conversation of gestures by Mead. And once achieved, it is essentially constituted by the recognitive capacity of taking the perspective of the other. Hence the recognitive theory of the constitution of personhood, even if this is not generally acknowledged in contemporary literature, involves a more or less explicit appeal to life and a sense of naturalness. If we want to adequately describe the phenomenon of recognition and to conceptually understand its

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1 This paper originates from a research funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project “The Social Ontology of Personhood: A Recognition-Theoretical Account”, and carried out in conjunction with Heikki Ikäheimo, Arto Laitinen, and Michael Quante. In a forthcoming monograph co-authored with the other investigators of the project, I develop more extensively the methodological frame I sketch here.



structure, we need to capture this stratum of recognition which is located at the level of natural living processes. First, recognition is always a direct or indirect manifestation of a vital process (Testa 2008) – which is true even for recognitive agency understood as a practical taking and attributive attitude and for institutional forms of recognition where inorganic plural or collective subjects may be involved. Second, the theory presupposes that there is a basic or primary level of recognitive interaction – which I'll call 'natural recognition' (Testa 2010) – that takes place ontogenetically before personal structures are acquired, may be continuously operative at a subpersonal level below them, and could be shared with other living animals and be phylogenetically relevant for the emersion of higher forms of recognitive interaction. Third, arguing that recognitive processes are constitutive of human personhood, the theory assumes that the peculiar way in which natural recognition gives rise to our personal capacities, is a trait that characterizes our human form of life, that is the way we can describe from within our natural way of life. Which means that the way we can grasp the notion of personhood is a form of self-interpretation of our animal life form, but does not mean that there is a necessary conceptual relation between being human and being a person, and that we could never meet other life forms, even artificial ones, endowed with personhood.

Conceived in these terms, the recognitive approach is a peculiar socio-ontological reconstruction of the classical thesis of humans as naturally socially animals, where the notion of recognition is supposed to be the interactive mechanism which plays a constitutive role for it. It is important to note that such an appeal to naturalness is not the mere result of a 'sideways on' or a 'from nowhere' objectivist perspective, but is rather a perspective which individual bearers of our form of life can access from within. Having a biological form and a functional organization is an inescapable aspect of our life form. The biological traits that characterize the organization of the human form of life can be both phenomenologically experienced from within, in the experience of our living body, and can also be re-described according to the level of age reached by the empirical science of the living. And this latter, objectifying description, can in turn have an impact on and modify our self-description from within.

One way to describe and conceptualize some aspects of this interweaving leads to the introduction of a distinction between 'first nature' and 'second nature': a distinction which applies to the description and conceptualization of the phenomenon of recognition (Testa 2009). This distinction must in turn be understood as a context-relative, not absolute one, and as being subjected to an internal dialectic, in accordance with the dynamic nature of

the phenomenon that it should capture and with the place-holder character of the notions of first and second nature. As seen, recognition theories refer, implicitly or explicitly, to a characterization of human nature. They assume that recognition is constitutive of our form of life. This seems to imply that recognition is not only compatible with our nature, but in a stronger sense falls within our natural potential: which implies the assumption that we are born with a natural endowment that, in some way, predisposes us to recognition. This is equivalent, to a certain extent, to saying that recognition is in some way related to our first nature. Note that the notion of first nature may be characterized differently: original nature, nature with which we are created, nature with which we are born, innate nature, physical and biological nature – which means in any case something given and not acquired.

In a nutshell, the fact that we have a social and cultural second nature is in itself a fact of our first nature, that is, it is something which characterizes our life form (see also Thompson 2008 and 2013). And as individual bearers of this life form, we can legitimately presume to have an access from within to our first nature. According to a physical-biological characterization of natural recognition, first cognitive nature will then be understood as the set of biological structures, functional mechanisms, and phenomenological experiences that we take as being the basis of the cognitive process that coordinates the interaction between human animals. That there is such a biological basis is an implicit assumption in theories of the social animal and in the constitutive theories of recognition, even if not always an acknowledged one. For instance, Hegel admitted as much when he placed recognition already at the level of the animal organism and of its systems of sensorimotor interaction and animal reproduction (Testa 2012a). If recognition theory makes sense, then there should be such a material biological basis to it, but of course the determination of whether there is one, and how it is functionally organized, is an empirical matter. However, today there are several scientific theories which appear to be candidates for specifying different aspects of the material biological basis of different aspects of natural cognitive processes: for instance, Edelman's neural Darwinism, the neurobiology of mirror neurons and imitation by Gallese, Rizzolatti and others, Tomasello's cognitive ethology, Bowlby's and Fonagy's developmental psychology etc. Even if reductionist results, according to which we could give an exhaustive account of the phenomenon of recognition only in terms of a specific scientific-empirical description of the phenomenon, are always incumbent, and cannot be excluded a priori, such theories are in principle compatible with a liberal and pluralist approach to the

naturalness of recognitive phenomena, according to which the biological basis predisposes us to developing dispositions and social forms of life whose characterization requires levels of description and vocabularies that cannot be (so far) reduced to the vocabulary that can be characterized in terms of the first natural mechanisms of our proto-social interaction. Anyway, the constitutive theory of recognition seems to offer a viable model for an interdisciplinary approach to human interaction which can combine empirical analysis of our human basic interactive competences and rational reconstruction which renders theoretically explicit the intuitive pre-theoretical framework underlying them and the corresponding ontological commitments: that which may be called reconstructive social ontology.<sup>2</sup>

### *3. The Recognitive Manifold: a Multilevel, Multistage, Multilayered, and Multidimensional Approach*

Let me first introduce a distinction between three different *directions* recognition can take (Testa 2011): 1) Re-identification: identification and perceptual re-identification (numerically, qualitatively and generically) of objects on the part of a subject; 2) Self-recognition: relation to self of a subject, of a type that is both re-identificative and attestative/performative; 3) Reciprocal recognition: relation between two or more subjective agents (and recipients) who coordinate their interaction by reciprocally identifying one another, attesting their identity and referring themselves to variously codified standards of behavior (functional, implicit, informal, formalized). The latter direction, which encompasses the former, is the one we have been so far referring to while speaking of recognitive interaction.

Now, a reconstructive approach to recognition, suitable for articulating a theoretical framework for ongoing interdisciplinary research in the field of intersubjectivity, seems to require us to understand recognition as

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2 To my mind, there is no reason why reconstructive procedure should be applied only to the analysis of symbolically pre-structured realities – as Habermas claims – and could not extend to pre-linguistic deep structures. Habermas' argument that reconstructive science should be limited to realities accessible only through interpretation (Habermas 1998), is finally based on an opposition between description – accessible to objectifying natural science – and interpretation – accessible to hermeneutical science – which does not seem to understand the fact that not only is there a non-ineliminable descriptive component in interpretation, but also that our descriptive access to life processes, for instance, has an ineliminable interpretative component.

a manifold rather than as a unitary capacity.<sup>3</sup> First, recognitive phenomena occur not only at the propositionally structured intentional, reflexive and purposeful level, but can also be not purposeful – and occur at the pre-intentional level of implicit, pre-reflexive forms of affective, emotional, attentional attunement. A *multilevel* approach seems then to be required, which can distinguish between the upper level of *foreground recognition* – including different possible combinations between intentional, purposeful, and reflective attitudes – and the lower level of *background recognition* – including different possible combinations between pre-intentional, not purposeful and pre-reflexive attitudes. Second, recognitive interaction develops in diachronic stages, both in ontogenesis and in phylogenesis, with lower stages – some of them shared with other living animals – serving as prerequisites for higher ones (Zlatev 2008). Hence, a *multistage* account seems to be required, which includes at the bottom forms of primary recognition which are not yet linguistically structured, and at the top linguistically structured forms of recognition between already constituted persons. To be sure, the notion of ‘intersubjectivity’ should be reserved for the latter recognitive relations between subjects endowed with fully-fledged personal and linguistic capacities, and understood as a species of the wider genus of recognition, which also encompasses not yet intersubjective stages of recognitive interaction. The idea that recognitive interaction constitutes personhood, then, means that there is a stage of it which ontogenetically and phylogenetically precedes personhood and which is causally relevant for bringing about some features of personhood. Third, recognition, even in its synchronic functioning, is a *multilayered* phenomenon, which can be instantiated not only at the intrapersonal (personal psychological capacities), interpersonal (status-like intersubjective relations between individual persons), and institutional layer (status-like relations between individual persons and institutions or between institutions), but which involves also a subpersonal layer.<sup>4</sup> The multilayered structure of recognition is a synchronic phenomenon, which develops itself in a stage-like manner: which means that upper layers lay on lower layers (for instance, the institutional layer lays on top of intersubjective practices, personal capacities, and subpersonal processes). And such a relation between layers should be distinguished from their reciprocal *mediation*: the fact that, for instance, some institutional standings mediate intersubjective relations between individ-

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3 For the use of the notion of “manifold” in the analysis of intersubjectivity, see Gallese 2001.

4 For the distinction between personal, interpersonal and institutional layers of recognition, see Ikäheimo 2007.

uals – who relate inter-individually as bearers of institutional standings – and that some aspects of individual personality are constituted by institutional practices, and that there may be correlative subpersonal material and phenomenological states to these aspects (hence mediated ones), does not mean that the subpersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal layers are now laying on top of the institutional one.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, recognitive phenomena are articulated along multiple dimensions which can be instantiated in each layer. A *multidimensional* approach to recognition should distinguish at least an identifying, an axiological, a cooperative, and a deontic dimension of recognitional attitudes.<sup>6</sup> The idea here is that recognitional attitudes respond to something or someone in accordance with these various dimensions. The recognitive attitude of taking something or someone (or being taken by someone) as X, can in fact involve mere identification, responsiveness to and attribution of value, a strong disposition to cooperate, as well as responsiveness to norms and attribution of normative statuses. It is important to note here that each dimension can be instantiated both in the foreground and in the background – for instance, the axiological one can be manifest and explicit in foreground reflexive attitudes, but also occur in pre-reflexive attitudes – and in multiple layers: an interaction which involves attribution of value can be both mediated by institutions, occur in the background (as is the case with implicit and pre-reflexive processes of socialization), and be instantiated at the subpersonal level (at least in the sense that there must be neural underpinnings of functional mechanisms corresponding to it). As for the identifying dimension, we need to introduce it as a distinct dimension first because every recognitional attitude, even if understood as a practical taking (where someone is taking something as X) always involves an epistemic attitude of identification of something as having more or less determinate properties and pertaining to some kind (see on this Koskinen 2017). Second, we need to introduce the identifying dimension because this plays a relevant role in natural biological processes. Furthermore, this allows us to describe forms of recognitive reification which are characterized by

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5 A fourth aspect of the recognitive manifold concerns the fact that recognitive interaction is bodily based and as such it is a *multimodal* activity which integrates in a sensorimotor way multiple modes of natural communication, combining the five human senses.

6 On the notion of “multidimensional” recognition see Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2011, pp. 8-9. In my account, identification should be added to the “deontic”, “axiological” and “contributive” dimensions of recognition introduced by Ikäheimo and Laitinen in their writings.

reductive identification, that is, by the fact that the identifying dimension tends to prevail over the other dimensions and to reduce them to itself (as is the case with the recent expansion of biometric recognition as a means of reductionist social control of identities).

Finally, the multistage development of intersubjectivity lets us also advance the hypothesis that the different levels (background, foreground), layers (subpersonal, intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional), and dimensions (identifying, axiological, contributive, deontic) develop ontogenetically and phylogenetically in a stage-like manner (from background to foreground level, from the subpersonal up to personal, interpersonal, and institutional level, and from a basic identifying attitude, to evaluative ones, up to a strong cooperative dimension, which finally allows for normative behavior). All along, this approach to the manifold structure of recognition also allows for a gradual model, according to which different levels, stages, layers, and dimensions are a matter of different interpenetrating degrees in a hierarchical complex structure rather than essential differences in terms of either or necessary conditions.

#### 4. *Subpersonal Recognition*

Let me now come to the notion of subpersonal recognition, which I have introduced as a distinct layer and which represents the principal novelty of the approach I am proposing. This notion, as already stated, plays a central role in our understanding of the recognitive constitution of personhood – which presupposes that there is a layer of recognitive interaction which is not yet or not fully personal and plays a constitutive role for personhood – both as a genetically causal condition of existence and as a permanent condition of intelligibility. But how exactly are we to understand the meaning of “subpersonal” here? The introduction of this notion is a major challenge to contemporary recognition theory, which tends to limit recognition to the level of already personally structured intersubjectivity, and to understand it as an active and deliberate intentional attitude (at the level of foreground attitudes).<sup>7</sup> Now it seems to me that it would be more faithful both to phenomenological experience, and to empirical research into primary interaction and its stage-like development and manifold structure to

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<sup>7</sup> See Honneth 2007, pp. 329-330, where recognition is qualified as a practical and affirmative attitude, relative to intersubjective action, and which should be contained in the main scope of the action and not just be a secondary or unintentional scope of it.

make room for recognitive phenomena to happen also in the background in the form of implicit, pre-reflexive and non-deliberate attitudes. But as we have seen, all recognitive layers (subpersonal, intrapersonal, interpersonal and institutional) can be instantiated at the background level. Hence, the notion of background recognition is not identical to that of subpersonal recognition. One could rather say that while the personal, interpersonal and institutional layers can be instantiated at both the background and at the foreground level, the subpersonal layer is only in the background (at least if we assume that reflexive and deliberate thought are proper to fully-fledged personhood).

Let's now try to better articulate the different aspects of the notion of subpersonal recognition. I will introduce here an operational distinction between four main aspects which this notion can refer to: 1) it can refer to subpersonal material biological correlates or underpinnings (such as mirror neurons) of recognitive interactions.<sup>8</sup> 2) It can refer to functional mechanisms (such as, for instance, the mechanism of embodied simulation in simulation theories of mind reading, see Goldman & Gallese 1998) underlying recognitive interaction and underpinned by some material state. 3) It can refer to a phenomenological aspect, that is to forms of subpersonal phenomenal experience – often mentioned in developmental empirical research on intersubjectivity – that manifest a pre-intentional, pre-reflexive form of embodied acquaintance with or attunement to others. This is also what Hegel in his Jena Lessons described as the “organic individuality” of the natural self (Hegel 1975, pp. 185-186 and 235), that is the embodied, recognitive living consciousness (*Begierde*) which doesn't yet have the personal structure of self-consciousness but is already endowed with a bodily self-feeling and a primordial recognitional capacity of relating to itself as another (Hegel 1975, pp. 241-242; see on this Testa 2012a), and that as such plays both a causally-genetic and a structural constitutive role for the emergence of self-consciousness (what Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* will name “the process of recognition [*Die Bewegung des Anerkennens*]”, Hegel 1977, § 178, p. 111). And this is what in other terms and from a different perspective Husserl referred to when he spoke of the ‘anonymous’, ‘unthematic’, ‘functioning I’, founded upon a passive and unconscious experience – which amounts to a ‘phenomenology of the unconscious’ (Husserl 1966, pp. 154) – and Merleau-Ponty, in relation to the experience of the other, described as an ‘impersonal’ or prepersonal experience (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p. 382) of the “primordial nature”. Here we

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8 On this use of ‘subpersonal’ see for instance Gallese 2005.

are dealing with an underground, depth dimension of subjectivity which remains below the level of personal experience but is nevertheless a manifestation of our living natural subjectivity.<sup>9</sup> And finally: 4) it can refer to singular subpersonal components of personhood, that is, to person-making characteristics which alone do not constitute personhood.<sup>10</sup> Here one could maybe distinguish between aspects 1 and 2, which are more properly subpersonal, and aspects 3 and 4, which could also be labeled as protopersonal (as for 3, because they can be in the background of personal experience, and as for 4, because person-making characteristics could be thought of as functional subpersonal components in the holistic system of personhood as a whole).

The notion of subpersonal recognition is particularly relevant, in relation to 1), as an operational reconstructive framework for empirical programs which look for material correlates or underpinnings in bodily states of recognitive dimensions of interaction;<sup>11</sup> in relation to 2), as an operational reconstructive framework for empirical programs which look

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- 9 See Zahavi 2002 for an attempt to argue that the notion of ‘anonymous I’ is compatible with the first-personal givenness, if understood as a pre-reflective awareness. While Zahavi is right in arguing that the notion of anonymous I captures some aspects of unthematic, pre-reflective awareness, it seems to me that to qualify the latter experience as first-personal in a robust sense misses the point that this anonymous experience is rather a subpersonal or protopersonal one – that is, in the best case a rudimentary form of first-person perspective (on the distinction between rudimentary and robust first-person perspective, see Baker 2015). From my point of view, what Baker names ‘rudimentary’ first person perspective could just as well be qualified as subpersonal or protopersonal I-perspective, since this is shared with beings who either can’t develop (such as some other animal beings) or have not yet developed (such as infants and damaged human beings) a robust first-person perspective, which alone defines essentially personhood according to the author.
- 10 If we conceive of personhood as a holistic social phenomenon, then it cannot be reduced to any person-making characteristics: in this sense, each person-making characteristic is a subpersonal one. For instance, even rationality alone could be considered as such a subpersonal trait, since there can be beings who have the capacity of rational means-end analysis without being persons at all, as is the case with some robots.
- 11 This is not to be confounded with a reductionist program, since to look for material correlates or underpinnings of recognitive dimensions does not involve by itself the further commitment to reduce such dimensions to material states (for instance, to affirm that a normative state in the deontic dimension is identical with the neural cerebral states correlated to it) and still leaves room for the idea that such states require other levels of description – other levels of logical representation – which cannot be exhausted by the description of the material states correlated to them.



for ontogenetic and phylogenetic functional precursors of higher forms of intersubjective recognitive interaction which are proper to human personhood; in relation to 3) and 4), as an operational reconstructive framework for the phenomenological analysis of those subpersonal or protopersonal background experiences which not only are supposed to ontogenetically and phylogenetically precede, and somehow constitute, personal and foreground ones, but also accompany them throughout their development and functioning at a deep, unconscious level.<sup>12</sup> Finally, all four of these aspects all together are extremely relevant for a reconstructive socio-ontological program committed to articulating the implicit ontological frame of natural recognition and its subpersonal level.

### 5. *Embodiment and habituation*

While deploying subpersonal recognition and its instantiations in its different dimensions, the notion of ‘embodiment’ has been used many times. I would now like to elaborate a little bit on this notion in order to understand how it should be modeled in order to capture crucial aspects of the phenomenon of recognition. First, when used in the context of ‘embodied cognition’, embodiment means that cognition is shaped by the kind of organism we have: that is, it is bound up with corporeal and environmental (both natural and social) constraints. Here embodiment can have at least three senses: 1) it can refer to an anatomical understanding of the role of the body, meaning that some parts of our body play a causal role in cognition due to their anatomical characteristics; 2) it can refer to actions performed through the body – for instance, the upward posture in walking – where the body plays a constitutive role for this action, being a causal condition which is not only concomitant but also necessary for the performance of this task; 3) it can refer to mental representations that have a bodily format.<sup>13</sup> This can perhaps be better captured if we use the distinc-

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12 Here I can only fragmentary refer to how the notion of subpersonal recognition could be empirically fruitful for reconstructive social ontology. In Ikäheimo, Laitinen, Quante, and Testa (forthcoming) I offer more detailed account of how current interdisciplinary research between the fields of evolutionary biology, neurobiology, cognitive ethology, and developmental psychology can contribute to our understanding of the natural basis of the recognitive dimensions previously identified.

13 For this distinction, see Goldman and de Vignemont 2009, who favor the third sense of the term.

tion between the three senses of embodiment laid out by Lakoff & Johnson (1999, p. 102), who distinguish between 1) the neural level of embodiment, 2) the cognitive unconscious level, which refers to the background structures and functional mechanisms of cognitive activities, and finally 3) the level of phenomenological conscious experience, which refers to the way we pre-reflexively schematize our body and things we interact with daily.

In this way we can understand both the constitutive role of the body – both in a genetically-causal and structural sense – as well as the background character of the phenomenological experience of its functional mechanisms. Still, one can detect in Lakoff & Johnson an excessive focus on the brain, which to my mind doesn't successfully capture the role of the body as a whole as a vehicle of cognition and of recognition. Moreover, the crucial point when speaking of embodiment, refers to the enactment of patterns of behavior in bodily form. This regards the way in which action is inscribed on the body as a whole (and hence the constitutive role of the body for action, as in the example of the upright posture). Finally, such an understanding of embodiment should not consider the individual body as being isolated from the environment it interacts with, but should rather perceive the dynamical – or enactive – process of reciprocal adjustment between the organism and its environment. Which, if we follow here Dewey's lesson (1983, p. 38), is a process where the living body, adjusting *to* the environment and its constraints, incorporates some of its features. While at the same time this is a process of adjustment *of* the environment (which in some other sense incorporates some aspects of the living bodies it interacts with, as happens with the phenomenon of the socio-ontological constitution of some aspects of natural objects through work or other human activities).

If we now reconsider embodiment as a process of inscription on the body of patterns of attitudes, we are in the best position to understand how recognition comes to be incorporated and can thus be qualified as embodied recognition. To my mind, here the notion of habit plays an essential role. First, habit makes more intelligible the relation between the three senses of embodiment and, when understood as a process of habit formation, offers a dynamic account of their interpenetration. In fact, habits presuppose the natural process of our living body and are in this sense *supported by* its physiological, anatomical, and functional configuration. It is bodily living beings who first come to develop habits. But habit formation is also a process of *inscription on* the living body of behavioral traits through exercise and repetition. Such an inscription is something which must have a material realization at the cerebral level (say in the configuration of correlated

neural patterns), and as such is inscribed in the causal chains of bodily activity – and in a wider sense the living body.<sup>14</sup> But more broadly speaking it is a process through which the whole living body may be reshaped in some aspects of its physical appearance if not its structure. In this sense the recursive structure of practice and repetition makes it possible for a habit to be both cause and effect of its own enactment in the individual body and in its environment (see Egbert and Barandian 2014). Second, the embodied process of habit formation constitutes new bodily capabilities of doing something, that is, causal abilities to perform something through the body. For instance, the upright posture is not only an enabling condition of walking – a causal mechanism necessary for walking to occur – but constitutes what walking is. In this sense habit’s embodiment plays a constitutive role for our agency and its causal powers not only because it accounts for the sensorimotor structure of agency but also because it allows for the social constitution of agential attitudes. It is exactly in this sense that John Dewey has understood habit as the “mainspring of human action,” (Dewey 1984, pp. 224-335)<sup>15</sup> since action always happens in the context of prior experience, and habit formation can be understood as the process which shapes within the body the regulated patterns of an individual derived from prior experience. Third, habit is a bodily process which has a phenomenological manifestation, which is connected with different levels of pre-reflexive bodily awareness (somatic, emotional, and later also mental) and a sense of the self.

The notion of habit is decisive for understanding the social character of embodiment (see Testa 2020). Habits are normally acquired, through exercise and practice, within social learning processes where individuals interact with each other. This can easily be translated into the notions of first and second nature: habit is built in the organic, living first nature, but nevertheless acquired as a result of a social process through which our materially realized natural functions are reshaped into the second nature of acquired dispositions to interact. Such interactive dispositions are a *second*

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14 This allows for a naturalized understanding of habits, which does not involve a deterministic understanding. The relation between habits and their neural underpinnings, if we are faithful to the recursive nature of habits, is rather an enactive one, where habits, as Bourdieu would put it (1990, p. 53), are both structured and structuring structures. In this sense Egbert and Barandian (2014) offer a naturalistic account of habits as self-sustaining patterns of sensorimotor coordination (correlated to sensorimotor-dependent neurodynamic patterns).

15 See also on this point Hegel’s statement that habit is the universal form of spirit (Hegel 1976, p. 132). See on this Testa 2020b.

nature insofar as they are partly constituted by the social process of cognitive interaction, but nevertheless a part of our nature, both in the material and functional sense that they are sustained *by* and inscribed *in* our bodily patterns and causal mechanism, and in the phenomenological sense that they are an immediate possession of our living body, something that we exercise spontaneously and to which we have access from within ourselves (according to the commonsense notion that something is ‘second nature’ for someone).<sup>16</sup>

The notion of habit is also well suited to account for some of the stage-like and developmental aspects of human interaction. At an ontogenetic level, individual development is not only accompanied by, but also sustained and shaped by the social process of habit formation in upbringing. And since habits can be transmitted intergenerationally within a culture, which also seems to happen within non human animal groups – as for instance with habits of tool use and handclasp grooming by chimpanzees (see Boesch 1996; Hirata and Celli 2003; Bonnie and de Waal 2006) – then habit formation can also account for some phylogenetic aspects. A closer look at the patterns of interaction through which habits are acquired and transmitted, allows us to see that they can easily be characterized in terms of cognitive attitudes. Even at its most basic levels, habit formation in social animals requires that they implicitly recognize each other as conspecifics, as individual animated agents, and that they are able to see themselves in the other – along increasingly complex forms of perspective taking – simulating and imitating the other’s behavior. And according to their stage of ontogenetic development, the practices of habit formation can involve some or all the dimensions of cognitive attitudes we have mentioned.

Now it is important to note that the notion of habit seems to be required also in order to account for the constitutive role of recognition and hence for its socio-ontological role. As we have seen, in classical recognition theory the latter is understood as a process of constitution of the subject, through which individual abilities and skills are constituted that become

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16 Second nature is not then a simple equivalent of “culture”, as it is very often used to mean, which would make that a completely eliminable notion. Accordingly, embodiment cannot then be conceived as a mere replacement of first nature with second nature – as happens in many forms of contemporary constructivism and also in performative theories of the social – a kind of magic according to which our first organic nature disappears in favor of the cultural one: in fact, second nature, in order to work properly, requires that a first nature continues to subsist. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to think that there is a reciprocal, enactive hybridization, that is to say that each of the two poles affects the other.

more or less stable dispositions of the human beings. In this sense, the constitutive theory of recognition seems to require a mechanism by which, starting from a set of functions with which we are endowed, dispositions to interaction are to be acquired iteratively and recursively, which we then attribute to the value of basic capacities of personhood (or person-making characteristics).

The process of habituation, the formation of behavioral habits, is precisely the process by which, through repetition and practice, dispositions to interact are shaped and reshaped. The process and constitutive conception of recognition implies then that recognition is neither a mere one-off event nor a transcendental-logical performance explicable by itself, but rather a self-constituting and a self-modifying process. The notion of habit and habituation thus seems to be conceptually presupposed by the theory of recognition. In that sense, even recognitive functions of the first natural type are such as to require activation, development and extension through an acquisition process that leads to the formation of dispositions of behavior and action. Habit formation accounts precisely for the fact that some attitudes can be socio-ontologically constituted and still be an embodied (and causal) feature of our nature. Moreover, the recursive structure of habits as self-sustaining sensorimotor patterns allows for the emergence, if not of a naturalized notion of autonomy, at least of some sense of self-organization. Here habits, already understood in the philosophical tradition as “mechanisms of self-feeling” (Hegel 1976, p. 131), provide a model for us to understand the constitution of the subject and of its pre-reflexive self-relation as an emergent web of habitual recognitive patterns, which in their rudimentary form are not yet personally structured.

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# ON THE AMBIVALENCE OF RECOGNITION

Arto Laitinen

## *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).<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 then 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).<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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 so-called luck egalitarians 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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 advise accepting the submissive role).<sup>15</sup> 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 suite 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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.<sup>18</sup> 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 admitting 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 narrative – 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 recognition 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 recognition 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 conducive 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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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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# INSIDE THE CANNY VALLEY: RECOGNITION AND THE EXISTENTIAL MODALITY OF BEING HUMAN

Joe Higgins

## *Abstract*

Through Hegelian philosophy, recognition has played a long-standing role in phenomenological and existential theories of human selfhood, subsequently being interpreted through the perspectives of sociology and politics. However, it is infrequently approached through the work of Heidegger or Sartre. In this paper, I seek to remedy this lacuna, demonstrating how the concept of recognition holds a central position in both Heideggerian phenomenology and Sartrean existentialism. Moreover, once this lacuna has been filled, an account of human nature emerges whereby the ontology of ‘being human’ is subject to a reciprocal process of intersubjective self-organisation. The intriguing consequence of this account is that the possibility of anthropoid artificial intelligence (AI) is left facing a near-insurmountable ontological challenge.

*Keywords:* Recognition, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Artificial Intelligence.

## *1. Introduction*

Recognition has played a long-standing role in phenomenological and existential theories of human selfhood, subsequently being interpreted through the perspectives of sociology and politics. In some cases, it is accorded prominence as a vital condition of being human. For example, Taylor (1992, pp. 30-31, 65) describes recognition as playing a central role in one’s sense of belonging and Honneth (1992, 2002) gives a psychological account of the need for recognition to become ‘socially visible’ and to build concepts of self-worth. In a deeper sense, Ikäheimo (2009) contends that recognition is “constitutive of the lifeworld of persons” (p. 36) in virtue of engendering collectively mediated norms that constrain individual dispositions and behaviours.

Nonetheless, the concept of recognition is often used ambiguously (see Iser 2019) and it is sometimes mistreated as an individual’s explicit dis-

position towards others (see Bernstein 2010, Quante 2004 and Wildt 2010 for relevant discussions), rather than as a fundamental condition of being human. Accordingly, an initial objective of this paper is to disambiguate the notion of recognition, elucidating it throughout section 2 as an *existential* of being human (that is, as a fundamental quality without which ‘humanness’ fails to emerge).<sup>1</sup> This objective is achieved by drawing on insights from two stalwarts of phenomenology and existentialism; namely, Heidegger and Sartre. To leverage Heideggerian and Sartrean concepts in support of recognition is in itself unusual and therefore of philosophical value; however, the primary motive for taking such an approach is that it uncovers two ‘constraints’ on human nature, each of which illustrates that to be ‘human’ is dependent on the communal generation and maintenance of intersubjective norms. The first of these constraints is *relational* in that the ontology of ‘human’ is bound within an interconnected network of social meaning – a claim that is borne out through the Heideggerian concept of ‘involvement structures’ – whilst the second constraint is *transcendental* in that the Sartrean notion of self-projection is regulated by the social world of future possibilities. Recognition, which is generally taken to be a resolutely Hegelian idea, is thus substantiated via an articulation of Heideggerian and Sartrean concepts, supporting the paper’s argument that humanness resides within an ontological domain – a ‘canny valley’ – of social normativity. In section 3, it will become apparent that foundational social normativity of the kind proposed accedes to an anthropic bias and, consequently, theorisation of recognition as a modality of being human amounts to a near-insurmountable obstacle for ‘strong AI’.

## 2. Recognition via Heidegger and Sartre

Before elucidating the claim that recognition is a fundamental part of the modality of being human, it is important to understand exactly what is at stake. Firstly, ‘recognition’ as a core constitutive aspect of existence is an inescapable feature of human life: it is the mutual adherence of one conscious subject to the presence of others, whereby one’s own self-consciousness comes to fuller fruition (Hegel 1975, 1977; Ikäheimo 2007). Importantly, it is not ‘identification’, in the sense that any given thing

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1 As will become clear in section 2, this claim persists even if one contends that recognition is a naturalistic process that extends to *all* (not just human) consciousness (see Ruggiu 2016 and Testa 2016).

can be ‘identified’ in numeric, qualitative or general terms, nor is it ‘acknowledgement’, in that this term is typically reserved for consideration of norms, values or principles (Ikäheimo and Laitinen 2007). Lastly, recognition is not necessarily an explicit form of ‘affirmation’, in the sense of analytically declaring  $X$  to be  $X$ . Instead, recognition is “the unity of opposite self-consciousnesses” (Hegel 1975, p. 177): a structural process of realising one’s own subjective autonomy through the reciprocal challenge of, and by, others’ autonomy.

For Hegel, who is often considered the initiator of phenomenology, recognition is the mechanism by which self-consciousness is generated; one assumes consciousness of oneself only through recognising another self-consciousness and being recognised by it (Hegel 1977, p. 139). In this way, recognition engenders the notion that subjectivity and intersubjectivity are concomitant, with every individual self-recognition relying on others (Ferro 2013).<sup>2</sup> Picking up this mantle, Heidegger (1976) argues that, as beings which are always already thrown into a world of meaning, every human is, equiprimordially and by ontological necessity, *being-with* (*Mit-*

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2 For some (e.g. Ferrarin 2016 and Testa 2009), it is not necessarily the case that actualization of self-consciousness coincides with the emergence of intersubjectivity. Ferrarin (2016), for instance, suggests that ‘recognition’ exclusively applies to the reciprocal encounter of self-consciousnesses, whereas there exists a more fundamental sense of consciousness that captures intersubjective referentiality of the world without recourse to direct recognition. Aside from Hegelian analysis, there is also a strong contemporary movement in favour of the idea that there is a primordial form of pre-reflective self-consciousness that is distinct from any socially emergent self-consciousness (e.g. Zahavi 2014). However, Hegel’s own words tend to proffer recognition as fundamental to self-consciousness: “Self-consciousness is *in* and *for itself in* virtue of the fact that it is in and for itself for an other, that is, it is only as recognized” (Hegel 1807/1997, p. 68). Thus, to accept recognition at face value, at least in Hegelian terms, is to follow the “standard reading” that self-consciousness is generated in a social context (Zahavi 2014, p. 10). Moreover, once recognition is considered in a broader phenomenological-existential context, as is the approach taken in this paper, then it can be aligned with the very intersubjective space of referentiality that Ferrarin separates it from. As we will see, employment of Heideggerian social concepts results in recognition constituting the social ontology of reference and meaning through which self-consciousness manifests.

Lastly, it is important to reiterate that the consideration in this paper is *human* existence. Therefore, even if one were to endorse the view that there is a primordial pre-reflective self-consciousness that is independent of sociality, such a self-consciousness would be common to all sentient beings and, when considered alone, would be divorced from the lived reality of humanity, for which sociality is necessary.

*sein*) others and *being-among* (*Sein bei*) worldly entities.<sup>3</sup> Focussing less on direct engagement with others, Heidegger's notion of being-with others captures the manner in which all worldly entities are referential of others' existence; that is, one encounters the world in pragmatic terms – as a place to act – and as one finds entities as affording certain possibilities for action, one is simultaneously aware that these same entities could be engaged by others in a similar way. This is not to say that others are “somehow added on in thought” (Heidegger 1962, p. 154), but that the world itself is ‘of others’ and ‘for others’ as it is for oneself. All action and thought is historically-culturally conditioned by this worldly permeation of others (Wheeler 2011). Importantly, then, being-with others in this fundamental sense extends subjective consciousness in an otherwise inaccessible manner. The notion that recognising another is some form of activity that needs explanation is eradicated in that the explanandum is presupposed in such a way that it can never be proven but only ‘disclosed’ through an ontological-phenomenological analysis (*ibid.*; Binswanger 1963). For Heidegger (as we will see in more detail shortly), there is simply no form of phenomenological experience that does not depend on the structure of *being-with* others: every event confronts relations of, and to, others. Yet again, this is not a relation that one cognitively achieves or develops into; rather, it is part of the ontological structure through which human being is phenomenologically intelligible. Although Heidegger rarely refers to ‘recognition’, his works thus encapsulate the Hegelian sense of confronting and exposing, in a man-

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3 One may feel that it is important to note that Heidegger's *Mistein* is an existential structure of the ontology of being human (or, more accurately, of being *Dasein*): it is an ever-present, intersubjective feature of being that manifests in all aspects of practical life through reference to social meaning. By contrast, Hegelian recognition is often expounded as involving a conflict or struggle, ostensibly typified by the master-slave dialectic. If such interpretations are taken at face value, there is potential conflict between recognition as a reciprocated (and reciprocating) foundation of existence and recognition as a process of struggle for actualization of one's consciousness. However, there are two responses to this. Firstly, in keeping with the previous footnote, recognition within this paper is being treated in a broad phenomenological-existential context, rather than party to Hegelian exegesis, and, consequently, it incorporates the holistic ‘otherliness’ of the world, even in the absence of directly present others. That is, one can still ‘recognise’ in the mode of conscious acquiescence to the existence of others, thereby allowing one's self-consciousness to come to fuller fruition, in the absence of directly present others. Secondly, the idea that human ontology is relationally constrained by the communal generation and maintenance of social norms is something that holds true whether such norms are produced through conflict of ‘unequal’ self-consciousness or a more genial experience of con-sentience.

ner that is reciprocated, the consciousnesses of others so as to corroborate one's own consciousness. As it occurs in an ontological register, this is not something that can be broken down into numeric 'acts of recognition'. Recognition is a fundamental structural feature of consciousness that pervades all experience – it occurs as an ontological necessity of humanness.

This does not mean, however, that one cannot recognise others in different ways. For instance, recognition may encompass various socio-political traits such as gender, class and ethnicity, as well as the possibility of recognising, to varying degrees, others' emotions, intentions and dispositions. However, such detailed and potentially cognitively demanding forms of appreciating others are always founded on the more fundamental recognition that is defined as a structural feature of consciousness.

The development that can be brought forth, here, is that this fundamental form of recognition can be construed as an *existential modality* of being human. By 'modality', I am not referring to a mere 'way of being' or 'form of life' within the domain of possible human existences. There is obviously, for instance, a modality to human existence in the sense that there is *something it is like to be human*, which fundamentally differs from *what it is like to be a bat*. More than being a characteristic of existence, the claim is that recognition encapsulates the very ontology of human existence. In other words, it is only as recognising and recognised beings that we can said to be 'human'. To lack this ability is to fall short of the qualities of consciousness that seemingly distinguish humans from other beings.<sup>4</sup> As an inherently *mutual* process, the interesting consequence of this claim is that humanness is defined intersubjectively; that is, the reciprocal nature of recognition imports intersubjective conditions on the very nature of being human. Another way of putting this is that recognition is not a *subjective* feature of consciousness (as per facticity and transcendence, of which there will be more below); rather, it emerges in the relations between subjects and their environments. As human 'environments' always involve other humans, the modality of being (a recognising and recognised) human is in fact a personal manifestation of the relational modality of (mutually recognising and recognised) humanity. As consciousness develops phylogeneti-

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4 This is, admittedly, a somewhat contentious claim, in that it results in a self-enclosed quality to 'being human' (as we will see in section 3). However, the arguments of this paper do not rely on the premise of proving that the ontology of humans manifests in recognition; rather, the requirement is that if one accepts recognition as definitive of humanness, which amounts to the relatively straightforward claim that self-consciousness defines humanness, then the subsequent premises and conclusion logically follow.

cally and ontogenetically, individual persons can be construed as nodes of intentionality, defined by their place within a network of modal relations, which is prior to and makes possible the very persons that are in question (Searle 2010).

Drawing on this elucidation of recognition as the intersubjective structure of humanness, a kind of *relational constraint* on what it means to be human is derived. By referring to the works of Heidegger, one can understand this claim in a phenomenological-ontological register. In simple Heideggerian terms, the idea is that the ‘world’ from which *Dasein*<sup>5</sup> manifests is limited by the overriding structural scope of humanness. Recall, for instance, that, for Heidegger, one of the key existential structures of human nature (perhaps the most explanatorily prominent), alongside *being-with others*, is the notion of *being-in-the-world*. More than referring to a simple spatial relationship, this notion of ‘in-the-world’ evokes a sense of dwelling in and with worldly entities in a meaningful way. In further detail, the sense of ‘in’-ness can be elucidated through the concept of ‘involvements’,<sup>6</sup> which are the defining holistic contexts of everyday practicality. Indeed, involvements create a “relational ontology” from which no worldly entity is ever simply *an* entity but is, instead, bound up in a large-scale network of iterative relational meaning (Wheeler 2011). As Wheeler (2005) explains, one may work *with* a laptop (a relation that Heidegger calls a “with-which”), *in* a university office (an “in-which”), *in order to* produce an academic paper (an “in-order-to”), which is targeted *toward* a specific philosophical analysis (a “towards-this”), *for the sake of* academic research, which is *for the*

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- 5 *Dasein* (‘there-being’) is Heidegger’s appellation for (human) existence, which is “distinctly different from other beings” (1962, 10) in virtue of caring for its surrounding world and, through this, harbouring “concern [...] in its being about its being” (*ibid.*, p. 42). In other words, *Dasein* “includes inquiry in its possibilities of being” (*ibid.*, 7). For Heidegger (1962), *Dasein* is to be distinguished from subjectivity or selfhood, yet any consideration of *Dasein* carries the “ontic indication” that the “who [of *Dasein*] is answered in terms of the I itself, the “subject”, the “self”.” (p. 112). As far as present needs are concerned, it is sufficient that the concept of *Dasein* is one of a world-immersed being (or ‘being-in-the-world’), for whom any form of subjectivity or (self-conscious) self-experience is experience of world-immersed being. As such, references to ‘Heideggerian self-consciousness and/or subjectivity’, with respect to recognition, can be aligned with *Dasein* as far as the argumentative premises of this paper require.
- 6 Heidegger’s original wording is *Bewandtnis*, which Tugendhat (1967) highlights as extremely difficult to translate in a manner that appreciates its nuances. However, the following description of ‘involvement structures’ is in keeping with that of prominent Heideggerian analysts who work from translations (e.g. Brandom 1983, Haugeland 2010 and Wheeler 2011).



*sake of* being a professional academic (a “for-the-sake-of-which”) (147). Crucially, the referential links across involvements culminate, without exception, in a *for-the-sake-of-which* (Heidegger 1962). Although Heidegger does not state it explicitly, these ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ connections are inevitably social, such that one acts ‘for-the-sake-of-being-a-parent’, or ‘-a-partner’, or ‘-a-professional’, or ‘-a-leader’, or ‘-an-antagonist’, or ‘-a-waiter’, and so on. This brings to light two key insights: (i). firstly, every act, no matter how seemingly iconoclastic, occurs within a totality of involvements that is socially constrained; (ii). secondly, any engagement with another, during which recognition is manifest, elaborates the normative domain of humanness.

Each of the above insights requires a little further development. With respect to (i), consider an experienced teacher at work. Whilst working, the teacher projects herself into the act of teaching and, in so doing, will “interpret herself in definite ways” which are identified by “certain normatively constrained, public ways of behaving” (Wheeler 2005, p. 122). As she expertly acts in the domain-specific manner of a teacher, her skilled and unreflective behaviour is subsumed into the situated social normativity of ‘involvements’ that is appropriate *for the sake of being* a certain way. She will go about her work with an attitude and practices that are generally expected of teachers. In this way, she is behaving in accordance with socially normative constraints (manifest as what is socially expected of a teacher), whilst also realising a system of involvement-structures which confronts the relation of acting *for-the-sake-of-being-a-teacher*. If one takes this idea and extrapolates it to all other situations (not just that of being a teacher), then one finds that the normative roots of the *for-sake-of-which* relation are not individualistically manifest – if they were, there would be no consensus regarding typical behaviours across and within societies – but are socially generated and maintained through ongoing interactions. How one acts for-the-sake-of-being-a-parent or for-the-sake-of-being-a-partner is normatively regulated by a collective aggregation of what makes a good parent or good partner. Even if one tries to act in a nonconformist manner, such nonconformism is only intelligible against the backdrop of communal normative expectations. In the most basic existential sense conceivable, relating to the world for-the-sake-of-being-a-human is itself a social relation, as individual humanness (normatively speaking) only makes sense from within the world of humanity (there will be more on this in section 3). As such, the very *being* of humanness is, to a meaningful extent, socially constrained by the collective mediation of others, which, at its most foundational, emerges with recognition.

With respect to (ii), consider that in everyday engagement with the world, one's experience of actions is, simultaneously, an experience of oneself as a "bodily power" for such an action, in that this specific variety of action accords with schematic potentialities of one's cognitive-motor repertoire (Gallese and Sinigaglia 2011, p. 127). Extending this to social encounters, one's recognition of another is, simultaneously, an experience of one's 'power' to recognise and, reciprocally, one's being recognised is an experience of one's recognisability. In this way, recognition fuels the expansion of one's consciousness, being driven through iterative cycles of self-other recognising and being recognised. Importantly, however, such recognition cycles are not 'bare' occurrences; that is, one frequently recognises another and is recognised oneself as *being a certain way* – a certain gender, age, ethnicity, class and physical stature, amongst other things. This holds true even if recognition is not present through a direct social encounter, but indirectly through engagement with worldly entities that are laden with social meaning (as per Heidegger's account of *Being-with others*). The extent to which any process of recognition entails any of the aforementioned traits will vary from circumstance to circumstance, but, with adult humans, there is always going to be some form of socio-normative trait that is incorporated. It is for this reason that the phenomenological concept of recognition harbours such important socio-political value (Althusser 1970; Fanon 1952; Taylor 1992). This does not mean that recognition is posited as a reflective or deliberative process; it remains a pre-reflective fundament of being human, but one wherein implicit predilections are often inevitably manifest. For present purposes, the significance is that recognition of (an) other(s) will, in general, further consolidate norms of humanness. If, for instance, there are specific norms associated with gender, as is typically the case in human societies, then recognising another as gendered (or being recognised oneself as gendered), will, generally, reinforce prevailing gendering norms. Similarly, if one recognises (or is recognised) as belonging to a certain ethnic group, then this process will normally reinforce norms that surround this ethnic group. Of course, social progress often comes about as a result of such norms being challenged (Haslanger 2019); however, in normal circumstances, norms are implicitly 'built-in' to mutual recognition, so that the socio-cultural norms that pervade all aspects of humanity, from small groups through to 'global culture', are inherently brought forth in each and every recognition.

What emerges, then, is that in virtue of the reciprocation that is at its heart, recognition moves beyond a 'pure' state of mutual generation of one another's (self-)consciousness to create an expanded sense of acquiescence

to norms. This is because the mutual recognition of (an)other(s) is recognition of a specific form of consciousness – a way of being conscious in and of a specific world – and, accordingly, self-recognition of the same sort.

Interestingly, one finds a complementary stance through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, for which responding to the question ‘what is it to be human?’ is motivation for the question itself; that is, the lack of some universal essence cultivates the open-endedness of what it means to be human (Sartre 1956). For existentialists, humans share the universal *condition* of being human, and how one exercises freedom determines who they are. Importantly, however, this freedom is not absolute. People will always be constrained and cajoled by their physical and social environments (i.e. facticity). *Ambiguity* is therefore at the heart of being human, both in terms of consciousness, wherefore each human “asserts himself as a pure internality...[but] also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things” (de Beauvoir 2015, p. 5), and in terms of temporality, for which “between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when [...] each person] exists is nothing” (*ibid.*, p. 6). In short, one leverages one’s factic background in the process of projecting oneself into domains of purposiveness, yet facticity is never escaped and self-projection is endless. This brings the concept of *transcendence* into play: “Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist” (Sartre 1956, p. 223). In other words, one’s projection can never attain that at which it aims (hence the ambiguity of existence). Yet, for Sartre, it is only by “always [...] seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realize himself as truly human” (*ibid.*, p. 224). Taken at face value, self-projecting in this manner has a strongly individualistic tone and existentialism is occasionally treated as endorsing this view (e.g. Tan 2006). However, this is a misreading of existentialism as Sartre intended it. Although each person is “radically free” and responsible for choosing the nature of her own existence, there is, in this very act of choosing, a universal application: “When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men” (Sartre 1956, p. 213). Every seemingly individual choice is, then, an expression of the freedom that is definitional of human existence. Connecting this idea to the concept of transcendence and the limitations of one’s factic background, Sartre contends that “every human purpose presents itself either as an attempt to surpass these limitations, or to widen

them, or else to accommodate oneself to them. Consequently, every purpose [...] is of universal value" (*ibid.*, p. 210). Thus, for Sartre, every act that any individual performs contributes to the possibilities of what one can perform *as a human*: each act, no matter how minute, is part of the process of fashioning one's own existence and, crucially, this individual fashioning is simultaneously a fashioning of the human scope of action possibilities.

To contribute to the fashioning of humanity in the very process of fashioning one's own existence brings to light another constraint on what it means to be human – a *transcendental constraint*. Consider, again, that one seeks to transcend one's facticity through the pervasive process of self-projection. Initially, this may seem to suggest that one may exercise one's freedom howsoever one wishes in accordance with one's facticity, but 'howsoever one wishes' is perhaps not as radical as it may seem. As party to specific histories and cultures, each human's capacity to consciously – pre-reflectively and reflectively – self-project is itself factually influenced, such that the scope of actions and accompanying thoughts is far from open-ended. For example, a being who is biologically 'human' but is completely feral – mute, violent, amoral, asocial, living in wilderness without any cultural influence or paraphernalia – would, arguably, be treated as non-human due to lacking any of the factic undertones that are part of the universal condition of humanity. At the very least, such a being would be at the very horizontal edge of humanness even if they were capable partaking in the mutuality of recognition. In a similar vein, but taken from a different perspective, a 'human' who could naturally run one-hundred metres in five seconds would exceed the transcendental scope of others' self-projective possibilities. This being would, once again, be at the bounds of ontological humanness, if they were to be considered 'human' at all. Lastly, think of a biological human who were capable of genuine telepathy: would they be considered 'human'? In each of these three cases, the beings in question inhabit a realm of existence that is beyond the normative domain of possibilities that is mutually fashioned by all humans. Each of their factic-transcendent situations is too radical and too removed from the global scope of humanness at this time to be readily accepted (or categorised) as genuinely 'human'.

A swift meander through the key facets of Heideggerian phenomenological ontology and Sartrean existentialism thus brings to evidence some vital insights into the ontological nature of humanness. What emerges is that 'being human' fundamentally entails a social dimension through the process of recognition and, once this claim is granted, one finds that the modality of 'humanness' is subject to mutual restraints of *relational* and

*transcendental* forms. The former of these amounts to in-the-moment pre-reflective structuring of cognition and action through communal norms that pervade existence, whilst the latter regulates one's self-projection regarding future possibilities.

### 3. AI's 'Last Dream' and Anthropic Bias

The premises of the previous section's arguments are core aspects of mainstream phenomenological ontology and existentialism; however, such claims are rarely developed in the manner demonstrated so as to have applicability to contemporary discussions in the field of artificial intelligence (AI). One of the most pressing issues for AI is, arguably, the potential to achieve 'strong AI' – AI that is, to all extents and purposes, 'human-like'. If such AI were to be achieved, then, one could reasonably suppose, it would be objectively alike to any given human. This is even more likely if strong AI were to be realised through material media that amounted to physical replication of the biological human body, resulting in a comprehensive achievement of Weizenbaum's (1980) 'last dream' for artificial intelligence. In short, if anthropoid robots were developed that had human-like appearance, intelligence and abilities in all aspects of existence, then one would expect such beings to be assimilated into everyday human life, living indistinguishably from others.

However, the preceding detour through phenomenological ontology and existentialism leaves one facing the fact this would not in fact be the case. Before addressing such a claim, it is important to swiftly distinguish it from the standard phenomenological critique of AI. This critique stems from the fact that, traditionally, AI – and, indeed, wider cognitive science – endorses the view that the mind is best replicated when treated as an individualistic, de-contextualised and cognitively isolated entity; that is, the discipline of AI leverages the metaphor of the mind as a computer and uses this as guidance for theoretical and practical developments – a view that is variously referred to as 'Cartesian cognitive science' (Wheeler 2005) or 'good old-fashioned AI' (Haugeland 1985). The orthodoxy is thus that cognition is an independent ontological domain that requires the computational manipulation of representational states. As such, the field of AI, for many years, has sought to retain the explanatory independence of the internal (i.e. neural) mind.

Drawing inspiration from phenomenology, Dreyfus (1991, 2007) criticises this view as ignoring the fundamentally enworlded, context-sensitive

and constitutively social dimensions of human existence – dimensions that would require replication if one is to treat human cognition as archetypical of ‘mind’. The idea of mind as a kind of central processing unit that sequentially receives inputs, computationally processes them and delivers causally formalised outputs is then replaced with the idea of mind as a dynamic phenomenon that depends non-trivially – sometimes constitutively – on its surrounding world (including the body and an environmental niche). This has occasionally been described (see Wheeler and Kiverstein 2012) as moving away from a kind of ‘Cartesian cognitive science’ towards a ‘Heideggerian cognitive science’, for which the notion of ‘being-in-the-world’ has central importance and, therefore, there is pursuit of a more satisfactory alignment between cognition and subjects’ existential nature as living bodily beings who are embedded in specific socio-cultural worlds.

Contrary to this, the criticism at the heart of this paper is that even if AI is to be fully ‘Heideggerian’, in the sense of achieving cognitive and behavioural abilities that are indistinguishable from human cognition and behaviour, it would still not be readily incorporated into the modality of human existence. The reason for this refers back to the concept of *recognition*. Recall that at its most fundamental, there is an implicit process of assuming consciousness of oneself through recognising another and being recognised (Hegel 1977). However, this process grows through the natural course of human phenomenology such that recognition of others imports more than a bare recognition of consciousness; it may include, for instance, recognition of another’s gender, ethnicity, or social class. What’s more, as recognition underpins the intersubjectivity within the manifestation of human existence, it is responsible for giving rise to the *relational* and *transcendental* constraints that were discussed in the previous section. Consequently, to recognise others and be recognised oneself leaves one existentially committed to the universal conditioning and communal normativity of humanity, which is to say that assuming consciousness through recognition renders one bound by the (global) social domain of all humans interacting with one another.

Whilst the mutuality of recognition is clearly understood as emerging between individuals, the above highlights that there is also mutuality amongst every given human being and humanity as a whole. What I mean by this is that each individual (cognitively and behaviourally) enacts the communally generated domain of norms that encapsulate ‘humanness’ and, in so doing, each individual contributes to the ongoing creation and maintenance of these norms. This means that there is reciprocal feedback between intersubjective normative generation and the canalisation of subjectivity. It

is due to this reciprocity that ‘being human’ is best captured *modally*; that is, the definition of ‘human’ assumes an operationally closed organisation whereby subjective and intersubjective interactions generate and maintain the existential domain of ‘humanness’ (cf. De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007 on dyadic interactions). Crucially, this is an organic process: recognition amongst consciousnesses begins a series of dynamic encounters (‘re-cognitions’) across humanity that escalates to a normative background of communally accepted dispositions, abilities and overt behaviours, which are all naturally underpinned by cognition. It is the organic nature of this process – the fact that it emerges phylogenetically and ontogenetically – that produces a problem for AI. Quite simply, the recognition mutuality that arises amongst humans would not necessarily manifest in an implicit manner between humans and AI: the very fact of knowing that AI is not biologically human would result in a reflective questioning of the abilities and behaviours of AI. Humans accept the relational and transcendental constraints of others due to the implicitness of mutual recognition, but once one has any reason to reflect on this implicit process – and artificialness is such a reason – then subjective acquiescence to intersubjective normativity is no longer guaranteed. In many ways, this is simply an accentuated version of the prejudices that one finds in racism, sexism or xenophobia, in that recognising the humanity of ‘others’ is questioned in such a way that one’s own existence is normatively divorced from the expectations one has of these others.

There is thus an aporia at the heart of the idea that the modality of ‘humanness’ is formed and maintained by restraints harboured within the ontological process of recognition. Whilst, in theory, recognition is part of the radical freedom and openness that are central to both existentialism and phenomenology, the fact that it relies on mutual circularity of subjective and intersubjective normative regulation means it nonetheless entails a systemically closed nature. In other words, ‘human’ and ‘humanity’, together, categorise one another and, crucially, do so at the expense of other beings, even if those beings demonstrate traits that are ostensibly indistinguishable from those of extant ‘humans’. In this way, being human is part of humanness and vice-versa; there is a self-organised closure to the normative ontological domain that is generated and maintained through the interactive dynamics that have recognition at their core.<sup>7</sup>

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7 *Autopoiesis*, which is the biologically grounded recursive reproduction of a system’s structure and processes through its own elements, may be thought of as an adequate description of this self-organisation (cf. Thompson 2007; Varela et al. 1991). By using such a description, the ontological elucidation of ‘being human’

There is an interesting contrast, here, with one of the prominent concerns with the development of ‘Big Data’ machine learning algorithms. Such machines are programmed to automatically analyse massive, digitally produced datasets that are used to measure, diagnose and research human social life (Kitchin 2014). A pressing problem is that as such data is increasingly used in the management of human institutions and interactions, one must consider how such machine learning algorithms reflect humans’ “entrenched assumptions about agency, transparency, and normativity”. (Gill 2019, p. 166). The programmed automaticity and fine-scaled inscrutability of such massive data manipulation renders the assimilation into daily life of these algorithms as potentially troublesome, having a “serious impact on how domains of knowledge and expertise are produced, and how such domains of knowledge become internalized, affecting institutional governance” (p. 167). The problem boils down to the lack of transparency and openness of such large-scale algorithmic processing; consequently, implicit biases and polemical views from arenas of public discourse may be compounded and extrapolated by the inclusion of ‘big data’ within everyday human practices. In short, then, ‘big data’ AI may take some of the worst aspects of humanity and feed it back in an aggravated manner without our awareness.

Yet, by contrast, the suggestion made above is that humanity may end up rejecting anthropoid AI even if they reflect our ‘entrenched assumptions’ in a perfect manner. That is, regardless of how accurately anthropoid AI mirrors our own nature, there will be distrust of even the slightest divergence from communal norms purely on the basis of the AI’s nature entailing ‘artificialness’. Small differences – be it failures, achievements, opinions, appearances, abilities – will, potentially, be dismissed as a product of artificial creation rather than according with the standard variance that one finds within ‘natural’ humanity. Worse than this, if anthropoid AI were to begin questioning harmful human implicit biases and norms, then there is the possibility that ‘entrenched’ attitudes would prevent acceptance, or even reasoned consideration, of such questioning on the basis that AI – in spite of anthropoid appearance, behaviour and thought processes – would somehow still be separate from the communal normative shaping of ‘humanness’.

Ultimately, there is an inescapable anthropic bias that is fundamental to the recognition that ontologically encapsulates being human. This bias

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that is outlined in this paper can be modernised, finding affinity with the paradigm of biological enactivism (*ibid.*).



emerges naturally as a consequence of the organic process of recognition and, consequently, anything ‘artificial’ – no matter how indistinguishable from human activity – will potentially be ostracised from the normative domain of humanity on the pure basis of awareness of its artificialness.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

Many interpretations of phenomenology and existentialism have leveraged the concept of recognition as central to theorisation of human nature. In this paper, this claim has been substantiated through the less commonly followed avenues of Heideggerian phenomenological ontology and Sartrean existentialism. Importantly, what emerges from such an approach is that ‘being human’ is ontologically constrained by the communal generation and maintenance of intersubjective norms. Ostensibly, this is philosophically unproblematic. However, once one extends such thinking to consider anthropoid AI, one finds a latent anthropic bias that is underlain by human phylogeny and ontogeny, and, therefore, discriminates against artificialness.

Consequently, to be ‘human’ is to partake in a self-enclosed domain – a ‘canny valley’ of organic sameness and familiarity – from which AI is, by definition, excluded. Of course, in the same way that humanness has phylogenetically transformed across history, there is strong likelihood that bias against artificiality will eventually subside, but, for now, humans are resolutely flesh and blood.

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# EMANCIPATION FROM WHAT AND FOR WHOM? A materialist critique of recognition

Lillian Cicerchia

## *Abstract*

This paper makes a materialist critique of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. It explores Honneth's relationship to Marxism as a foil for developing his Hegelian-informed, pragmatist way of thinking about human emancipation as a struggle for recognition, as well as the role of critical theory in that struggle. The paper then argues that this "Marxian foil" distorts the issue of emancipation from and relative to structural injustices, which leads recognition theory to equivocate on the kind of emancipatory knowledge that critical theory seeks to produce. Finally, it argues that contemporary iterations of historical materialism are congenial to many of pragmatism's insights. It also has a normative horizon that the recognition paradigm does not – namely, thematizing the problem of constraints on self-determination in broader struggles for emancipation, and indeed, recognition.

*Keywords:* Marxism, Pragmatism, Emancipation, Structural Injustice.

## 1. *Introduction*

In the early 2000s, Iris Marion Young began drawing attention to the concept of structural injustice. Young argued that there are processes that structure our lives through objective constraints on our actions, within which we are differentially positioned, which then shape how we respond to our circumstances. For Young, structural injustice includes a single mother who is not able to find affordable housing because she has an unstable job, bad credit, and cannot outperform other housing applicants. Thus, an impersonal form of class and gender-based vulnerability ensues (Young 2011, pp. 43-74). Young's example suggests that she saw unique theoretical value in analyzing the socio-economic conditions for structural injustice. They tell us something normatively salient about the structural or

institutional obstacles we face in changing the world. Indeed, Young defines the normative category of domination as “institutional constraints on self-determination,” which means that the concept of constraint can enrich our thinking about human interests in emancipation and what is standing in the way of realizing those interests.

In this paper, I critique Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition in Young’s spirit. I argue that Honneth’s way of thinking about human emancipation as a struggle for recognition fails to provide the normative content that Young considered so important in the idea of constraints. In brief, Honneth’s view is that human beings have an intractable interest in emancipating themselves from domination, which is reflected in the ongoing practice of re-interpreting dominant norms to challenge them and make them more inclusive. The task of critical theory is to articulate this process of norm re-interpretation to generate emancipatory knowledge. Marxism is a key foil for this view as an example of a theory that construes this process as narrowly as possible, in contrast to the broad normative horizons (and therefore the greater emancipatory potential) of a Hegelian-informed pragmatism. My materialist critique is of how this “Marxian foil” distorts the issue of emancipation from and relative to structural injustice.

In one way, my critique is familiar insofar as it recalls Honneth’s well-known debate with Nancy Fraser, in which she argues that it is implausible to portray all social conflicts as singularly motivated by a desire for recognition (Honneth and Fraser 2003). It differs in another way, however, because it explores how Honneth sacrifices clarity about why critical theorists’ ought to care about structural injustice. I am interested in the problem of constraint and whether its normative salience can be adequately taken on board from within a theory of recognition, specifically one that uses Marxism as its cautionary tale. First, I explain how Honneth leverages a contrast with Marxism to develop his concept of emancipatory interests and the role of critical theory in articulating what they are. Second, I argue that this Marxian foil leads Honneth to equivocate on the kind of emancipatory knowledge that critical theory seeks to produce by failing to distinguish structural injustices from other kinds. Finally, I point out that Marxism and pragmatism are not as dissimilar as Honneth thinks. In fact, contemporary historical materialism is congenial to many of pragmatism’s insights. It also has a normative horizon that the recognition paradigm does not – namely, identifying sources of constraint on attempts to realize emancipatory interests, and indeed, recognition.



## 2. *Honneth's Marxian Foil*

I argue that Marxism is singularly important for Honneth's critical theory. It is instrumental both for creating the warrant for his theory of recognition and to justify his way of thinking about critical theory's relationship to social conflict, freedom, and emancipation. In brief, Honneth uses Marxism to distinguish his broad-minded, recognition-seeking perspective from a narrow-minded, economic one. Marxism also circumscribes the way in which critical theory should understand itself and its practice. On this meta-theoretical level, too, Marxism's narrow-minded focus on class antagonism inspires Honneth's alternative. It is important to Honneth that critical theory's own practice be folded into a more general theory of social reproduction than what Marxism has to offer, alongside the many emancipatory struggles with which it is engaged.

One of Honneth's central goals in developing his critical theory of recognition is "part of a larger project of moving critical theory away from its Marxian roots" (Thompson 2014, p. 782). According to Honneth, Marxism is problematic because it uses an untenable structuralist-functionalist logic and has a utilitarian impulse. It considers norms and values only to the extent that they serve the interests of capital accumulation. It is also utilitarian because it sees class struggle as a battle over structurally conditioned competition driven by interests and not about disrespect (Honneth 1995, pp. 145-152). The outcome is not a good one because Marxism limits the scope of struggle as well as the grounds for critiquing forms of domination that are not economic in nature. Marx caused us "to lose sight of the inter-subjective structure of freedom" (Honneth 2011, p. 51). The unfortunate consequence is failing to envision human flourishing with an idea of the good life beyond the downfall of class societies. One can hardly speak of justice in a robust sense on these terms.

Honneth's counter-vailing theory of recognition is well-known. In brief, Honneth argues for a kind of "normative monism" to understand the moral aspirations of all social movements (Fraser, Honneth 2003, p. 4). At their core, they are all engaged in a struggle for social respect. Feelings of disrespect and humiliation are the fundamental drive of all social conflicts. Indeed, social conflict is fundamentally a process of re-interpreting dominant norms to make them more inclusive. Honneth uses Hegel's lord and bondage scenario to illustrate the tendency for dominant groups (the lord) to see norms as natural things in themselves, whereas oppressed groups (servants) relate to norms with a different, transformative attitude that challenges exclusive practices (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Honneth writes that,

“the source of recurrent social struggles is thought to lie in the fact that any disadvantaged social group will attempt to appeal to norms that are already institutionalized but that are being interpreted or applied in hegemonic ways, and to turn those norms against the dominant groups by relying on them for a moral justification of their own marginalized needs and interests” (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Marxism fails because it claims that human conflicts are only motivated by economic interests. As he argues, “The Marxian doctrine of class struggle fails above all because it views all conflict among groups or classes as economically motivated, whereas historical reality suggests that experiences of injustice and of frustrated hopes have far greater motivating power” (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Thus, Marxism’s narrowness prevents it from appreciating the diminished role that class divisions play in motivating struggle in today’s society and acknowledging other motivations. Honneth’s theory of recognition claims a more expansive normative horizon.

In the first place, then, Marxism is a foil for Honneth because it represents a narrow-minded, restrictive normative perspective in contrast to Honneth’s broad-minded, inclusive one. That Marxism is narrow-minded and economic is a widely accepted interpretation of that tradition, so one might think that Marxism would simply retreat from Honneth’s view after having superseded its limited normative horizon. But Marxism does not retreat from view. Honneth continues to use it as a foil to explain the role that he sees critical theory playing in the struggle for recognition. In “Is there an emancipatory interest?” Honneth picks up a thread of Habermas’ argument in *Knowledge and Human Interests* that there is a connection between constructing critical theories and social reproduction. Honneth thinks that Habermas fails to correctly articulate this connection because, in this instance, Habermas’s social theory fails where Marxism succeeds. Thus, circumventing Marxism is again important not only for understanding the scope of our emancipatory interests, but for the self-understanding of critical theory regarding how it is relevant for articulating them.

Habermas argues that there is a constitutive connection between constructing theories and social reproduction. Habermas says human beings develop historically situated forms of knowledge through various mediums that are central to reproducing the societies in which they live. Each of the mediums that Habermas describes plays out at the level of what we do in the human sciences. Habermas identifies three central mediums through which people acquire knowledge by reflecting on and communicating their experiences. The first medium is work, the second is language, and the third is power. As for the first medium, labor, Habermas claims that people

have an instrumental interest in developing causal explanations for why labor is organized in the way that it is. This interest is instrumental due to the imperative of maintaining one's material reproduction through labor. In terms of the human sciences, the labor medium leads to technical knowledge in the realm of empirical research – perhaps sociology, history, economics, and the like. In terms of the second medium, Habermas argues that people have a practical interest in symbolic reproduction through linguistic communication because they must acquire understanding of how to interpret the world around them. He argues that this practical interest is reflected in the human sciences that are “interpretive” (literature, arts, history, etc.). The third medium, power, reflects an emancipatory interest. Habermas identifies “struggle” as an activity that is as invariant to human social reproduction as labor or symbolic reproduction. In the human sciences, struggle is reflected by critical theory, which combats and questions existing social orders insofar as they are relations of domination (Honneth 2017, p. 909).

Honneth is unconvinced by Habermas' last thesis on the tie between emancipatory interest and critical theory. In Habermas' trio of social reproduction activities (labor, symbolism, struggle), Habermas justifies including labor and symbolism into a list of invariant human activities, but not struggle. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that human societies need to reproduce life through material and symbolic means. But why do societies need conflict and struggle? If we cannot answer this question, then we cannot grant ourselves the warrant to claim that critical theory reflects an invariant emancipatory interest. Habermas cannot give a satisfactory answer because he relies too much on psychoanalysis as a model of social reproduction. In the psychoanalytic framework, individual human beings struggle to liberate themselves from the internal heteronomy of their desires. The story of the oedipal complex, for example, is a story of infantile dependencies on desires that must be overcome for social cohesion to endure. Individuals struggle to liberate themselves from being dependent on their mothers in different ways, depending on one's gender socialization. By transposing this model onto whole societies, Habermas characterizes struggle in terms of “a type of cognitive striving without any apparent motivational basis in worldly goals or activities” (Honneth 2017, p. 910). For Habermas, struggle began to seem more and more like a self-referential, collective mental process, rather than one that is rooted in conflicts between social groups.

Honneth argues that it is a mistake to transpose the model of the individual onto society, since such a model must assume that the collective

psyche has a pre-existing interest in unity, just as in the individual psyche does (Honneth 2017, p. 911). If there is a pre-existing interest in unity, then conflict and struggle are unlike labor and symbolism in the sense that one can anticipate some resolution of struggle but invariance of the latter two. In this picture, critical theory is not a necessary human science, but an historically contingent one. Importantly, this mistake on Habermas' part is a Marxian mistake, despite the fact that Marxism is notorious for having the opposite problem. Marxism is a theory of conflict between social groups, namely social classes, so it is not guilty of viewing society as a macrocosm of the individual psyche. And yet it, too, imagines some resolution to struggle. Its economism prevents it from thinking of emancipation beyond the collapse of class society, so it fails to offer a "properly" ontological basis for thinking about emancipatory interest *sui generis*, as an invariant part of social reproduction. In other words, Marxism fails to see struggle as intrinsic to what human societies, or human beings, are (Honneth 2017, p. 914).

The problem for Honneth is that Marxism is the only serious contender as an alternative social theory to various sorts of individualism, including the psychoanalytic view used by Habermas, which locates motives for resistance in the dispositions of individuals. Honneth also considers and rejects what he calls the "Kant-Rousseau" view found in liberal and republican theories. According to Honneth, the Kant-Rousseau view is that individual agents revolt against domination to assert their superiority as well as to demonstrate their own virtues and abilities (Honneth 2017, p. 913). Human beings strive to better themselves in comparison to their peers because they desire acknowledgment of their individuality. By these lights, the Kant-Rousseau view does not do better in integrating a notion of collective strife into its model of social reproduction. By contrast, Marx thought that workers experience domination, which would lead them to organize themselves to confront capital and thus generate emancipatory knowledge. Marx's view is one of education-by-struggle. Thus, Marxism plays a special role as a foil in Honneth's critical theory as compared to Kant, Rousseau, and Freud because it is the only social theory that fundamentally challenges the individualist or psychoanalytic paradigms by taking social groups and collective strife seriously.

A solution must avoid economistic Marxism but keep the collective in mind. Honneth claims that pragmatism has this virtue. From a pragmatist point of view, agents within oppressed groups internalize dominant norms, re-interpret them, and then use the mutual expectations of those norms throughout society to give themselves institutional leverage. Mutual expectations are an enabling condition for emancipatory practices because

they provide a common basis for challenging one-sided interpretations so as to make them more inclusive. Thus, institutions can change to accommodate new interpretations in a social learning process that is inherently conflictual. Such a process is a necessarily recurring practice vis-à-vis the dominant norms in society “in the face of a stubborn tendency toward their naturalization” (Honneth 2017, p. 918). In other words, Hegel and John Dewey unite in a neo-pragmatist theory of recognition.

Honneth’s pragmatist turn culminates in the claim that critical theory plays an epistemic role in the total social reproduction of society. What critical theory does is articulate and interpret the struggle for recognition, which is a process without end that continually re-configures the scope of social freedom. Institutionally, critical theory reflects this process within the human sciences. In addition to the contributions of those sciences that produce technical and practical knowledge, critical theory produces emancipatory knowledge. Importantly, critical theory’s relevance to social conflict, struggle, and emancipation depends on the distance that it places between itself and Marxism. The latter claim follows from the view that Marxism cannot accommodate “critique” and theory construction into its theory of social reproduction because it collapses the normative horizon of freedom prematurely. In sum, Marxism remains as a foil despite long since having fallen into disrepute because (1) it helps to justify a normative theory and (2) it helps to justify that theory’s usefulness to social and political conflict.

### *3. What kind of emancipation are we talking about?*

In a nutshell, the point of Honneth’s Marxian foil is to show that Marxism is neither as critical nor as radical as it seems because it is limited in scope. What is just as important is that the foil serves to show that Honneth’s critical theory has a comparatively broader horizon for human emancipation. I now tie together several critiques of Honneth’s view that have been raised over the years, all of which have to do with Honneth’s treatment of labor, class, and capitalism. I pursue the debate about these topics specifically as a response to the architecture of Honneth’s argument; Honneth uses Marxism’s preoccupation with class to highlight its limits, so I follow suite to highlight his own. I argue that, in sum, the Marxian foil distorts Honneth’s attitude toward structural injustice. It motivates an overly capacious notion of norms and institutions that eclipses questions of feasibility and realizability under current, systemic constraints on self-determination. What

Honneth envisions as the process of interpreting and re-interpreting dominant norms cannot be exactly the same thing as the process of figuring out what to do about those constraints. One reaches the limits of “recognition” as a meta-critical theory at the point where one begins to equivocate on the type of emancipation that is at stake at these different normative registers.

To review, Honneth argues that one must focus on normative desires, aspirations, and justifications that ground struggles for freedom to get the widest critique of modern societies possible. His own narration of the economic side to these struggles is that capitalism (the distinctly modern economic system) is only relevant to this project insofar as it is a value-laden system that works by enacting certain norms that we should criticize. If capitalism restricts freedom, it does so because it disrespects and humiliates people, which is a claim that Marxism itself could not justify due to its focus on material conditions and interests. There are several criticisms of this point of view that I want to pull together in the service of highlighting how the Marxian foil generates an analytical distortion of structural injustice.

Nancy Fraser’s intervention remains important. In *Redistribution or Recognition?*, Fraser argues that Honneth reduces political sociology to a moral psychology of pre-political suffering, by which she means that Honneth’s normative monism derives its concepts from the sufferings, motivations, and expectations of social subjects, claims to reconstruct them, and then purports to uncover the basic moral structure of all discontent. She claims that this point of view is *prima facie* implausible and that “a less tendentious reading of a broader range of research sources would doubtless reveal a multiplicity of motives – including resentment of unearned privilege, abhorrence of cruelty, aversion to arbitrary power, revulsion of gross disparities of income and wealth, antipathy to exploitation, dislike of supervision, and indignation at being marginalized or excluded” (Fraser, Honneth 2003, p. 203). If these various motivations could all be collapsed into one idea, it might be something much more general than recognition of one’s identity, like fairness. Thus, Honneth stretches the notion of recognition to its breaking point, beyond all recognition.

Likewise, Michael Thompson has noted the “curious simplicity” of Honneth’s view. The theory of recognition presents itself as “a formal theory that lacks historical and sociological content” (Thompson 2014, p. 785). Further, David Borman notes that the scope of the theory is so broad that one can literally fit any demands for justice into it, but such a broad scope may be empty of content because, even if one agrees that recognition will ultimately resolve our problems, it tells us little about what we need to do

to achieve it (Borman 2009, p. 949). These criticisms point out an ironic twist: What makes Honneth's theory of recognition distinct from Marxism is its broad normative horizon, but it is also prescriptively vacuous when it comes to articulating what system mechanisms need to change and what would make them change for the better.

In my view, these critics converge upon the problem of using pre-political experience as a normative reference point for understanding injustice. In particular, the problem of lack of content results from failing to theorize domination as a structural injustice that is distinct from other kinds of conflicts. Theorizing structural injustice requires asking a series of intermediate questions between misrecognition and recognition. These questions involve identifying key structural and institutional obstacles that struggles for emancipation face. Even if one grants that recognition simply is what freedom entails in the most ultimate sense, then it still does not follow that such desires lead anyone to reflect adequately on the obstacles to achieving it. For Honneth, resolving any and all conflicts in our social life involves re-interpreting dominant norms. No doubt it does, but this claim is minimal, not asking several basic political questions: If people are conscious of experiencing disrespect in basic social institutions, then what prevents desires for recognition from becoming effective political demands?

Consider capitalism as a structure. As Fraser argues, recognition monism is congenitally blind to system mechanisms within capitalist markets that cannot be reduced to cultural schemas of evaluation (Fraser, Honneth 2003, pp. 215-6). The true premise that markets are always embedded in specific cultures (or recognition orders) cannot *ipso facto* generate the conclusion that their behavior is wholly governed by the dynamics of recognition. For instance, it is plausible to argue that capitalist markets generate normative expectations for merit in achievement, but such norms do not determine wage rates across dissimilar market sectors. Other causes involve more impersonal mechanisms, like supply and demand for labor, the marginal cost of production, the level of labor productivity, inflation, and so on.

What I add is that recognition monism is not only congenitally blind to such mechanisms. It equivocates between what Young identified as "domination" and "oppression." Young defines domination as an institutional constraint on self-determination, and oppression as an institutional constraint on self-realization. Of course, my point is similar to Fraser's in the sense that I am adding an economically oriented "redistribution" category to the discussion, but my emphasis differs. In my view, "redistribution" as an analytical perspective does not capture the relevant equivocation either,

which has to do with the normative register that critical theory uses to talk about the system mechanisms involved in understanding capitalism's political economy. By contrast, the content of the concept of domination is "constraint," which trains one's attention on the obstacles that political agents face in making demands for redistribution.

In my view, the analytical disadvantage to conflating domination and oppression in an all-encompassing theory of recognition is that one simply loses relevant distinctions between the types of freedom that are at stake at these different normative registers. For instance, Honneth argues that the class struggle thesis must be false because pre-capitalist societies had economies that were thoroughly embedded in particular cultures (or recognition orders). Therefore, purely economic motivations for struggle cannot hold trans-historically. But Marxists often point out that the separation of the economic and political spheres develops uniquely in capitalist society. The reason that Marxists point out the separation of spheres is to show that struggles for justice have a particular set of institutional obstacles under capitalism. In contrast, pre-capitalist societies had a different institutional configuration that did less work to obscure the relevance of economic struggles to other kinds of demands for justice. The latter claim is obviously premised on the understanding that there is quite a lot of social struggle that goes on that does not conform to an economic logic, like struggles for democracy and political rights that influence the now separate, modern state. The central idea here is not to presume what motivates each and every social conflict, but rather to say that the relative attainability of political goods under capitalism can obscure the workings of class domination and consequently devalue those goods (Wood 2016, pp. 19-48, 204-237). Marxism's judgment here is that there is domination, not that there is only one reason to fight it based on economic interest.

It might be with good reason that Honneth and Marxism are talking about different problems. Honneth may be right that Marxism does not offer an ontological basis for understanding social conflicts, so it has not historically seen fit to imagine that conflict is an invariable part of social reproduction. But why would it? Structural injustices are Marxism's focus – *contra* Honneth, this focus makes sense to me if one is not willing to accept the invariance of structural injustices to social reproduction. One would not want to make an ontological claim that roots structural injustice in the type of beings that humans are. There is no attractive reason to do so that would not reify the injustices that critical theory should want to undermine. The consequence of making such an ontological claim would be accepting domination as something that will continue in our social life, and there is



nothing inherently critical or emancipation-seeking about that. The same cannot be said for an interest in eradicating all social struggle and conflict *tout court*. Conflicts are not necessarily symptomatic of injustice in the sense that the conflict arises from relations of domination or that one side of the conflict is oppressed. One might instead claim that many conflicts that challenge hegemonic, naturalized norms are healthy for functioning democracies to promote social inclusion. In such a case, struggle is indeed necessary for social reproduction.

One might think that the possible difference between social conflict more generally and conflicts arising from structural forms of domination would give us reason to differentiate the kinds of concerns that Marxism has with the ones that Honneth has. Instead, Honneth uses disagreements with Marxism to warrant focusing on social conflict in general, which equivocates on the kind of emancipation that is at stake. Naturally, critical theory is interested in all kinds. But surely some of its interest lies in disambiguating between conflicts that might always exist and structural injustices that one hopes will not always exist. One could use the category of domination to show how, for instance, capitalist labor markets undercut the capacities of people to participate in re-interpreting dominant norms. Indeed, it is capitalism's ambiguous nexus of freedom and constraint that makes it normatively interesting.

Instead of differentiating among these various concerns, Honneth chooses to interpret the labor movement's successes over and against capitalism's system logic to be a feature of that logic by sublating class conflict to a meta-logic of recognition. He argues that capitalist markets only work when they are responsive to those values of participants that hold outside the terrain of market exchange. Markets experience disruption if they do not respond to our norms and values, so their persistence must be due to intrinsic normative features of markets that make them responsive: Markets make an implicit promise of social freedom that entails seeing oneself as an equal within market exchange (Honneth 2011, pp. 189-192). Put differently, one can interpret the struggles against capitalism to its credit, since markets need such struggles to achieve social integration. This optimistic (and teleological?) view of market freedom is tendentious, paying attention to legal reforms at the expense of considering the markets' role in reproducing social pathologies that are not strictly "economic" in their normative content. Indeed, one must ask, would Honneth also tell those who are subject to racism, xenophobia, and sexism that these oppressions hold the promise of freedom because they provide the opportunity to fight against them? Of course, he would

not, but then it's not clear what to conclude, if one allows that market mechanisms may reinforce and re-produce these other oppressions in a distinctively capitalist form (Jütten 2015, pp. 195-199).

The argument is also tendentious because it one-sidedly focuses on the recognition demands of marginalized or oppressed people as what drives social conflict, rather than those of the non-oppressed or non-marginalized. However, a more sober analysis of class conflict might indicate that it is implausible to talk about capitalist social reproduction without talking about the structural incentives for capital to defend specific property relations in fundamental ways (Gourevitch 2015, pp. 103-116). It is not as though capitalists, bankers, and their highest-level managers are engaging in class conflict because they are at loss for social respect! Indeed, their struggles are part and parcel to the constraints that the poor and working classes of capitalist societies face in making their demands for justice effective in the workplace, the family, and the public sphere. The latter is a point that one easily misses if one uses the theory of class struggle as a foil for what counts as narrow in scope.

The crux of the issue is that Honneth overgeneralizes claims about what motivates social struggle onto claims about remedies and aims, which leads to obscuring domination and thus equivocating on what one means by freedom or emancipation (Borman 2009, pp. 944-949). In sum, recognition theory, in its anti-Marxist variation, misses the normative salience of an important link in the chain, which is what dominated people are up against – constraints. In my view, it is not sufficient to say that oppressed groups have an interest in re-interpreting hegemonic norms and therefore they will produce emancipatory knowledge that gets reflected at the level of critical theory. Clearly, there is something(s) getting in the way of doing just that. Succinctly, the persistence of domination demands that critical theory engage with social science, not just moral psychology. Attempts to reconstruct the ongoing dynamics of societal norm-interpretation will otherwise tell one little about how to change the things that one can no longer accept, given that one knows that they are unjust.

#### *4. Marxism and Pragmatism: We're not so different, you and I*

One way of putting my argument thus far is that a debate between Honneth and Marxism (or simply historical materialism) is not principally about human motivation or normative desires. Rather, it is about how to think about changing the world in the face of structural injustice. In my

view, contemporary historical materialism makes a much more modest and politically salient claim than what Honneth attributes to it, which is that it is necessary to eliminate class domination to achieve the wider goal of human emancipation. Honneth, for his part, does not see why a structural injustice of the class division kind requires thinking in a different way about our interests in emancipation. He thinks that all of these questions can be subsumed within the idea of re-interpreting dominant norms, as if constraints only lie in what people think and feel rather than in the adverse incentives and constraints that accompany domination. My materialist critique of recognition is simple and as old as capitalism itself, and yet it bears repeating. But why must one repeat it?

To correct for an overcorrection. Marxism shoulders some responsibility for insufficiently tending to moral, spiritual, and normative development within the earlier stages of critical theory. I say *some* responsibility because it is my view that just how economic Marxism really is depends to an extent on the political sympathies of the critic. As a sympathetic critic, I find it difficult to read the middle-period Marx's musings on the value of art, the insistence of Otto Neurath about the incommensurability of human values, the yearnings of Alexandra Kollontai for love and intimacy, or Frantz Fanon's diagnoses of socially generated psychological pathologies as "economism" in any normal usage of that word. Nonetheless, the New Left identified real shortcomings and attacked them with vigor and at length. It has subsequently fallen to idealist tendencies within critical theory to rectify this deficit. Now, critical theory can and should reconstruct the moral development of modern societies while preserving the materialist perspective that is required to disambiguate among different normative registers of critique. Indeed, I argue that contemporary Marxian social science is not so far off from pragmatism, as Honneth imagines it to be.

First, it is possible to develop a materialist pragmatism. Rahel Jaeggi has argued for preserving the "materialist moment" of normative critique by combining the idea of social practice together with the idea of problem-solving. First, Jaeggi's definition of a social practice is an informal, repeated, and rule-governed behavior that is the condition of possibility of certain institutions without being reducible to them (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 56-58). Practices are normatively structured, habitual behaviors with rules that are tacitly understood by those who participate in them. Those who participate in a practice tacitly understand what they must do to make a practice successful as the type of practice that it is. That a practice is successful or not depends on how one evaluates it based on certain norms that are implicit, yet inherent to it. Norms explicitly and implicitly prohibit

certain behaviors and permit other behaviors by defining and establishing “the conceivable modes of behavior within a form of life by normatively structuring the space of possibilities of action itself” (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 95). For instance, one would call a doctor who did not really want to help their patients and only wants to make money a bad doctor because being a good doctor means caring about patients’ health. In fact, one would argue that only by caring about patients’ health can one succeed in the task of being a doctor at all. One can expect that the normative deficiency of not caring about patients will lead to errors that then lead to a failure to provide adequate care.

Social practices produce problems along with normative resources for resolving problems. Problems are objective and subjective, at once given and made. People create problems through contextual, historically situated practices, but they also react to the conditions produced by previous attempts to solve problems. In other words, problem-solving does not occur in a vacuum and has material conditions. At the same time, the implicit, normative structuring of a practice is what provides the resources for identifying that there is a problem that must be resolved. The norms embedded in a practice enable or disable one from perceiving that there is a problem or what the nature of that problem is, which sets the terms for how one goes about resolving it. Neither the norm nor the practice is contingent. Rather, they stand in necessary relation to one another (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 205). For Jaeggi, attempts to solve problems give rise to developmental patterns that one can describe as “learning processes” in which the agents who participate in practices engage in problem-solving, put forward solutions, and attempt to solve further problems (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 134-144). Importantly, the “learners” involved are responding to the conditions that are given by previous attempts.

In my view, Jaeggi’s effort to preserve the materialist moment goes a long way to minimizing the idealist tendency toward a tendentious interpretation of normative development. Dominant norms exist, but they exist in response to constraints that hinder their re-interpretation. It follows that people have various reactions to economic constraints that run the gamut from ideological consent to resignation to deep-seated resentment of inequality. Indeed, Jaeggi has defined the economy as a social practice (Deutscher, Lafont 2017, pp. 160-180). She argues that even the standard economic categories, like labor, exchange, and property, have normative conditions for success *and* are only partially intentional in how people reproduce them. This point has been obscured in critical theory because philosophers have arbitrarily differentiated between action-theoretical and

system-theoretical analyses of the economy. In the former, intentionality and normative expectations reign, whereas in the latter, impersonal mechanisms and norm-free incentives drive social reproduction. By contrast, a practice-theoretical approach to the economy can open the “black box” of the economy itself, as agents live it and as it congeals into developmental patterns and institutions. In such a view, the economy would take on a wider significance than it currently does in critical theory because it would disable clean distinctions between the “economic” and “non-economic” that ultimately make the former into a black box once the theorist deems it normatively thin, narrow, and thus uninteresting (Rothe, Ronge 2016, pp. 3-22). Put differently, Jaeggi turns a problem with Marxian economism into a more general failing of critical theory to conceptualize the economy in a normatively robust and “wider” way.

Second, one can postulate a pragmatist historical materialism (Renault 2013, pp. 138-157). Indeed, I think that such a view is implicit in much post-1970s analytical Marxist social science that attempts to illuminate what Marx called the “silent compulsion of economic relations” (Marx 1990, p. 899). For instance, the historian Robert Brenner has been widely influential in promoting a class struggle, or conflict-centered, research program in contrast to the earlier “productive forces Marxism” that postulated the technological determinist, teleological theory of history that Honneth always seems to have in mind when he critiques this tradition. In my view, Brenner offers an early, and yet implicit, practice-theoretical view of the economy that begins to open the “black box” that Jaeggi rightly identifies and begins to conceptualize it in a way that is both historically specific and less arbitrarily sequestered from other aspects of social life. Brenner writes, noting,

[T]he specific forms of socio-economic behavior that individuals and families will find to make sense and will choose will depend on the society-wide network of social relationships – society-wide constraints and opportunities – in which they find themselves. These constraints present themselves to individual economic agents as unchangeable givens, because they are sustained by collective socio-political action. The upshot is that every historically evolved type of society – what Marx called mode of production – has its own microeconomics (Wickham et al. 2007, pp. 57-58).

Brenner argues further that in every society there are relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations among direct producers and exploiters that, taken together, make possible the regular access that people have to land, labor, tools, or other resources that are

necessary to reproduce social life. The nexus of practices that constitute these relationships determine one's access to a society's social product depending on one's position within them. Thus, such practices also define the basic constraints on individual economic action. Brenner calls these practices "social property relations" to clarify that they do not only define the resources at individuals' disposal, but the manner in which individuals gain access to resources and their income more generally (Wickham et al. 2007, p. 58). Put simply, social property relations condition how one acts, not just what one has; one's position determines what one has to do to get what one wants (Wright 1997). As a result, one can expect individuals and families to systematically adopt a particular, corresponding set of economic strategies in light of their constraints. Brenner dubs these strategies "rules for reproduction" (Wickham et al. 2007, p. 59). Brenner also claims that when rules for reproduction are enacted in aggregate, they give rise to corresponding and historically specific developmental patterns. For instance, producers under capitalism are subject to the competitive constraint, whereas in peasant-producing societies there are reasons to avoid subsuming production to market demand. Substantively, the necessary conditions of capitalist social property relations are (1) that economic agents are separated from the means of subsistence and (2) that they lack the means of coercion that would allow them to reproduce themselves by systematically appropriating by force what they need from producers. By contrast, "feudal" social property relations were dominated by peasant possession of land that was not market dependent, direct access to the factors of production, and surplus extraction by the economic coercion of "lords" who owned politically constituted property. In peasant-producing societies, direct producers produced for subsistence, not for exchange. They could engage in market exchange, but they did not *need to* because there were not under pressures to produce competitively. Lack of market dependency generated "safety-first" avoidances of becoming heavily dependent on market exchange.

The normative dimension to this pragmatist historical materialism is undeveloped thus far, but it is not difficult to see how it might be. Like all practices, rules for reproduction and their corresponding social property relations have norms by which participants perceive that they fail or succeed, according to the purposes and goals that are posited and reproduced along with the structure itself. One can see how certain norms would emerge that are directed toward societal reproduction in this historically specific sense (like that hard work should merit a high reward), which form the basis upon which people articulate demands for justice. As Jaeggi puts it, the

normative and the material are entangled within historical patterns of development, which is why, as Hegel says, class conflict rarely erupts in capitalist societies simply because the “rabble” are starving but also because they are outraged. Lack of resources is a reality that is perceived through normative expectations that are simultaneously culturally rooted but (and this is key) adapt to the competitive constraints that capitalism places on every individual, regardless of their cultural dispositions (Fraser, Jaeggi 2018, p. 142). Some of these norms will hinder or help social learning, or an adequate reflection on the conditions that give rise to them, and it is up to political agents to frame social problems in a way that facilitates learning about those conditions.

What makes historical materialism distinct from pragmatism, however, is that this tradition is strongly committed to analyzing historically specific conditions of political economy in the service of illuminating equally specific constraints on self-determination, or domination. There is, in my view, a strong republican ethos to this research program. It thinks that there is something empirically distinct about the kind of constraints that the rules for reproduction of the political economy places on people such that they can be said to dominate them. My sense is that there is a meaningful difference between the practices that make up such rules for reproduction and practices in a more general sense. Consider a medical practice in contrast to capitalist competition. Both a doctor and a capitalist possess certain resources that patients and workers do not have access to. A doctor has specialized knowledge and a capitalist owns the means of production and thus access to the means of earning a salary or wage. Both patients and workers gain access to these resources by engaging in a relationship with doctors or capitalists, and there is a difference in social position between the two based on one’s need and the other’s possession of resources that might satisfy that need. Despite the similarities, the difference between a doctor engaging in a medical practice and a capitalist engaging in market competition is that a capitalist, by virtue of their social position, has interests in competing with other capitalists to avoid losing their position as a capitalist. The latter entails a set of behaviors toward workers, namely that workers’ wages and consequent well-being become a cost that a capitalist must negotiate – minimize if they can. Not so with a doctor. Doctors can work in all kinds of contexts and the possessing of their resource does not immediately entail the manner in which they treat their patients. A doctor can work in a public clinic, a private practice, for a single patron, and many other alternatives. A doctor need not treat their patients in any particular way to keep hold of their resources and remain a doctor. The idea here

is that a practice like market competition has a stronger connection with social positioning and objective constraint. It is, in other words, a distinctively structural practice.

What historical materialism insists upon (and what pragmatism does not) is this structural way of talking about practices, or the practical moment of engagement that agents have with objective constraints and their social position. As Young argues, “The first observation to make about social structures [is] that they appear as objective, given, and constraining” (Young 2011, p. 55). Social structures constrain individuals indirectly and cumulatively by blocking off certain possibilities for action, by placing individuals in positions in which not all avenues for action are equally available or likely to succeed in bringing about the results that one desires. However, individuals continue to act to attempt to bring about desired results, which refracts back onto the structure itself. New constraints arise from attempts to influence the old. Structures, then, are recursive in nature and self-made, much like the problem-solving dynamics that Jaeggi identifies in all practices, which means that they also have an important normative structure. If Marxists have not always articulated this normative structure in a satisfying way, the conclusion, in my view, should be to try to articulate it better, not to use Marxism as a foil in a way that precludes appreciating the distinctive nature of the structural practices that Marxism rightly emphasizes as placing constraints on self-determination.

A retreat from the Marxian foil might reveal that historical materialism can also illuminate normative complexity in a way that an all-encompassing theory of recognition cannot. Honneth’s perspective is that “the given form of social reproduction in society is determined by shared universal values and ideals” (Honneth 2014, p. 10). From a pragmatic historical materialist perspective, this position overestimates the extent to which societies are held together by deeply shared values, like a democratic conception of freedom. Recognition theory finds it difficult to imagine how a social world could be held together without such shared values, whereas pragmatic historical materialism has no trouble imagining such a world. Historical materialism emphasizes how people engage norms to confront constraints, especially those who are subject to domination. People with few choices often navigate them with the justifications that are available, which is not equivalent to sharing values and ideals. Of course, the fact that some values are more generalizable than others implies that the notion of shared values and ideals has some bearing on reality. But historical materialism permits the theorist to indulge in skepticism, for instance, that many members of the capitalist class actually



share an ideal of democratic freedom. Perhaps they justify their behavior in its name, or their concessions to democracy are more conjunctural than they are fixed. To simply turn Honneth's original concern about Marxism's narrow economism back around on recognition theory: Historical materialism maintains that the normative development of social structures is not reducible to a struggle for recognition. One will miss much of the normative texture of social conflicts – contradiction, constraint, domination – if one performs that reduction.

### *5. Critical Theory as a Practice*

I conclude by way of agreement. I think Honneth is right to argue that critical theory should understand itself as playing a role in social reproduction. As Robin Celikates (2018) argues, critique itself is a social practice, which reflects on as much as it facilitates the social practices around it. The “critique” part orients itself toward human emancipation and makes our strivings for it clear to ourselves. My point is not that political actors themselves do not understand their strivings – I believe strongly that they do – it is rather to justify them and, if need be, critique them when their strategies or normative formulas are not effective, not persuasive, and so on. Critical theorists do not have privileged access to knowledge about injustice, but they do have access to the means of intellectual labor by which they aggregate and systematize ideas. Thus, critical theory is indeed involved in social reproduction, and perhaps endemically so, as Honneth suggests.

What I find important to add is that critical theory should also ask the “strategic questions” at a high level of abstraction. I have argued that the simple elegance of Honneth's view of re-interpreting dominant norms and what motivates social struggle is suspicious because it refuses to acknowledge the importance of critiquing structural injustice on terms that differ from social conflicts in general. To my mind, structural injustices place unique constraints on those fighting for justice, forcing critical theory to interrogate the normative and material development of these constraints in the service of figuring out what to do about them. They require, in other words, a theory of transformation (Wright 2009, pp. 273-307). Without asking these questions, it is unclear to me what Honneth's process of norm-interpretation amounts to in the end. It is too vague, and I do not see what it has to do with basic goods and the obstacles to attaining them under conditions of domination.

My argument here is not new. Contrary to the dominant view of the New Left that the Old Left reduced all matters of recognition to economic interest, I think the Old Left's fundamental insight was *not at all* that one can reduce human emancipation to classlessness. Their insight was rather that one must go through the obstacles that the class structure imposes on emancipatory struggles in order to achieve emancipation. To my mind, this insight has an uncanny theoretical status in contemporary critical theory since it is simultaneously self-evident and yet it is persistently elusive. Honneth's project contributes to making it so, which I suspect is why Honneth continues to use Marxism as a foil: If you beat the beast long enough, maybe it will die. But as long as capitalism exists, Marxism is not going anywhere, whether it flourishes in the human sciences or not.

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# BETWEEN MIMESIS AND FICTION: RECOGNITION IN ADAM SMITH

Mariafilomena Anzalone

## *Abstract*

In Adam Smith's ethics of sympathy, recognition is closely linked to seeking approval and esteem from other social actors. In the light of the undoubtedly great importance granted by Smith to social approval a series of questions arise, such as: Does the search for recognition necessarily imply the adoption by the individual of mimetic behaviours which, by replicating what is socially shared, guarantee approval and esteem? And to what extent does mimesis require a capacity for fiction? In this regard, is it not the case that individual moral evaluations risk being reduced to the conformist reverberation of those of society?

The aim of this essay is first of all to understand in which terms Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, understands the link between mimesis, fiction and recognition. To this end, the role played by mimesis and fiction will be scrutinised along the various interconnected dimensions that structure the complex phenomenon of recognition: the emotional, the one linked to public success, and the moral one. Finally, in the light of the peculiar account on mimesis developed by Smith on aesthetic grounds, also the ethical implications of this link will be discussed.

*Keywords:* Recognition, Sympathy, Mimesis, Fiction, Model.

In a recent volume<sup>1</sup> Axel Honneth has pointed to Adam Smith's ethics of sympathy as the most influential source for the philosophical notion of recognition. Recognition is there closely linked to seeking approval and esteem from other social actors. This process, as Honneth does not fail to point out, is presented by Smith in a positive light, namely due to its relevance in the constitution of both the social and the moral self.

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1 Cf. A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2018. Although Smith does not exactly use the term recognition, he provides, Honneth maintains, a widely influential conceptual account which impacted both moral philosophy and common language.

In the light of the no doubt great importance granted by Smith to social approval – in which philosophers such as Max Scheler have even seen the enactment of a real “almighty social authority”<sup>2</sup> – a series of questions arise, such as: Does the search for recognition necessarily imply the adoption by the individual of mimetic behaviors which, by replicating what is socially shared, guarantee approval and esteem? And to what extent does mimesis require a capacity for fiction, whereby qualities that are not possessed are simulated and conducts which are not intimately adhered to are adopted? In this regard, is it not the case that individual moral evaluations risk being reduced to the mere and sometimes hypocritical conformist reverberation of those of society?

The aim of this essay is first of all to understand in which terms Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, understands the link between mimesis, fiction and recognition. To this end, the role played by mimesis and fiction will be scrutinised along the various interconnected dimensions that structure the complex phenomenon of recognition: the more strictly emotional dimension, the one linked to public success, and the moral one. Finally, in the light of the peculiar account on mimesis developed by Smith on aesthetic grounds<sup>3</sup> in the *Theory*, also the ethical implications of this link will be discussed.

### 1. Copying feelings: emotional recognition and imperfect mimesis

As is well known, according to Smith, both the search for social approval and the attribution of normative authority to others are closely

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2 Cf. M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, tr. by P. Heat, Routledge, New York 2008, p. 6. As part of a broader theoretical refutation of the ethics of sympathy, Scheler targets Smith for the excessive and contradictory role that he credits to sympathy in the self-evaluation judgment. Among the most recent contributions on the Scheler *Vs* Smith debate, see, among others: R. Debes, *From Einfühlung to Empathy: Sympathy in Early Phenomenology and Psychology*, in E. Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy: a History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, pp. 286-321; A. Alfaro Altamirano, *Max Scheler and Adam Smith on Sympathy*, in “The Review of Politics”, 79, 3, 2017, pp. 365-387.

3 In this respect, key is the reference to the essay on the imitative arts, the first draft of which dates to 1764, and which Smith reworked in 1777. On the elaboration of this text, see W.P.D. Wightman, *Introduction* to A. Smith, *Of the Nature of that Imitation which takes place in what are called the Imitative Arts*, in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects with Dugald Stewart's Account of Adam Smith*, ed. by W.P.D. Wightman, J.C. Bryce, I.S. Ross, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1982, p. 172 (henceforth: *IA*).

linked to our natural inclination to sympathy. The latter constitutes an original as well as fundamental intersubjective bond, thanks to which individuals enter into emotional connection with each other and experience the pleasure of the mutual sharing of feelings and passions. This pleasure is never independent from an evaluative component. Without evaluation it is possible to cognitively understand a feeling, but not to sympathetically take part in it.

The idea that sympathetic passions always imply formulating a judgment on the appropriateness of other people's feelings with respect to the situation that aroused them strongly suggests that Smith would be reluctant to consider them as the mere mimetic effect of a passive emotional contagion. Even in those situations in which a more immediate and reactive level of sympathy seems to prevail, as in the case of the jolts of our body while observing the "dancer on the slack rope",<sup>4</sup> Smith excludes that a mere mirroring might take place, and points to the essential function of the imagination. When we look at the tightrope walker, "is the impression of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy".<sup>5</sup> What we perceive on a sensorial and emotional level certainly depends on the observation of an "original" that our imagination, however, cannot really "copy", since our senses cannot directly perceive the feelings and emotions of the tightrope walker.

Mimetic is therefore above all the sympathetic imagination,<sup>6</sup> thanks to which we can place ourselves in the situation of the other and even pretend to be "into their body".<sup>7</sup> The so achieved mimesis, clearly, is not entirely based on the lived experience of others, but rather requires the essential reference to the lived experience of the spectator. This point is even clearer, if one takes into account that, according to Smith, authentic sympathetic passions do not primarily ensue from the movements or attitude of the observed person, but rather require an overall understanding of their conduct and an interpretation of the context of their passion.<sup>8</sup> Someone's crying can generally sadden us, but only after having understood the reasons for their suffering, having placed it in a context in which it acquires meaning,

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4 A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie, Liberty Fund, Indianapolis 1982 (henceforth: *TMS*), here, p. 10.

5 *TMS*, p. 9.

6 In this regard, cf. J. Chandler, *Adam Smith as Critic*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 128.

7 *TMS*, p. 9.

8 "Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites", *TMS*, p. 12.

and having deemed it appropriate, can “any actual sympathy that is very sensible”<sup>9</sup> take place and be accompanied by emotional participation. Only then can the imaginary displacement in the position of the other take place and generate a fitting sympathetic passion.

As it exceeds emotional mirroring and operates more at the level of the imagination than at that of the senses,<sup>10</sup> the mimesis at play in sympathetic passions is, however, constitutively imperfect. Whenever we strive to reproduce within ourselves the experience of others, the “secret consciousness”<sup>11</sup> in us that authentic identification is impossible never fades out. Even the deepest and most complete identification is, in fact, still an imaginary swapping of places, in which our feelings and passions are distinct from those of the agents; they are weaker and less lively than theirs.<sup>12</sup> Compared to the “original sensations”, made of one’s own pleasures and pains, those of others are “reflected or sympathetic images”, they are “shadow” compared to the “substance”.<sup>13</sup>

The sympathetic process therefore has an essentially asymptotic nature, which likens it under many respects to the relationship Smith sees between original and copy in the imitative arts.<sup>14</sup> Sympathetic feelings are not original. Their genesis is linked to the feelings of another individual, which we try to understand and feel by taking their point of view. They are therefore “copies” which, however, do not imply a “servile” imitation,<sup>15</sup> nor do they achieve a total identification with the original. While resembling it, they maintain a substantial difference with the original, which in Smith’s eyes is not in the least problematic. It does not,

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9 *TMS*, p. 11.

10 Sympathetic passions, in fact, can also be aroused in the spectator by feelings that the agent does not show openly or does not even feel. Smith writes: “We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality”, *TMS*, p. 12.

11 *TMS*, p. 22.

12 *TMS*, p. 22.

13 *TMS*, p. 219.

14 Cf. *IA*, Part I. In this essay the disparity between the imitating and the imitated is connected to two key concepts in Smith’s theory of sympathy: that of analogy and that of imagination. In this regard, see A. Zanini, *Adam Smith. Morale, giurisprudenza, economia politica*, Liberilibri, Macerata 2014, p. 72. Due attention is laid on Smith’s accounts on music in order to capture “the asymptotic nature of sympathy” in C. Labio, *Adam Smith’s Aesthetics*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, cit., pp. 117 ff.

15 *IA*, p. 175.



in fact, affect the moral and social relevance of sympathetic feelings, which manage nevertheless to guarantee the amount of correspondence between our emotional life and that of others that is “sufficient for the harmony of society”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, similarly to what happens in the case of artistic mimesis,<sup>17</sup> it is precisely the awareness of the disparity between the actor’s “original” feelings and those “copied” by the viewer that makes sympathy so pleasant. Precisely because we are aware that it is impossible to achieve a complete identification with the experience of others, precisely because it is never accessible as direct experience, we take pleasure in experiencing the mutual concordance of our feelings. Although my friend’s suffering is and remains different from the compassion I feel for them, our feelings correspond, and this correspondence, even in sharing pain, is pleasant for both of us. In fact, they too desire understanding and, in order to foster it, they mitigate, if not their passions, at least their manifestation, trying to make them easier to share for the viewer. This effort, in which it is once again crucial to imagine taking the point of view of the other, allows the agent to sense even the weakest sympathetic passion in the viewer. It also bears testimony, according to Smith, to the key corrective and regulatory mediation function of real spectators. By sympathizing with that imperfect “copy” of their feelings, in fact, their own suffering will be mitigated not only by the pleasure of mutual sympathy, but also by the fact that, in this way, they are able to see it in a more “candid and impartial” light.<sup>18</sup>

In the sympathetic process, mimesis appears, therefore, first of all as functional to achieve a sort of emotional recognition, linked to specific feelings and passions, and embedded in specific situations. While identifying with the other, trying to “copy” and relive their joy, we do not sympathise with joy in general, but with that of a person who, for example, has just achieved great success at work. But what happens when we do not just acknowledge their joy and want to share it, but we rather want to be, like them, the object of general approval and sympathy? Under what conditions and in what terms does emotional mimesis become behavioral mimesis?

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16 *TMS*, p. 22.

17 See what Smith states about sculpture and painting. The latter, reproducing three-dimensional objects on a flat surface, features greater disparity between the imitating and the imitated than sculpture does. And it is precisely this greater disparity that makes pictorial imitation not only more interesting but also more enjoyable. Cf. *IA*, I.6 ff.

18 *TMS*, p. 22.

## 2. Imitating behaviors: public recognition between fashion and models

Needless to say, sympathizing with someone does not in itself imply a desire to identify with them: although it is easy to acknowledge the appropriateness of pain in someone who has suddenly lost their job and to share their despair, certainly none of us would want to imitate or emulate their deeds. On the contrary, according to Smith, a widespread tendency can be observed in people not only to sympathise with but also to imitate the rich and powerful: sympathy towards them translates into the desire to be like them.

Whereas it is clear that, in the case of sympathy for pain, the natural disposition to preserve oneself and avoid situations of suffering does not make the condition of the sufferer desirable, this disposition does not explain why “all the toil and the bustle of this world”<sup>19</sup> are employed in the attempt to reach power and wealth. Why not be contented by the well-being ensuing from satisfying all basic natural needs, which guarantees a peaceful life? Why try at all costs to improve one’s condition and become rich and powerful? According to Smith, the answer is to be found first of all in the great social esteem linked to these conditions. Due to their pleasantness, these are associated with a series of feelings so pleasant as to attract the sympathy and awe of people.<sup>20</sup> Unlike poverty, which, due to its unpleasantness, is ignored if not rejected, placing the ones who experience it “out of the sight of mankind”, in an “obscurity” almost more painful than disapproval, wealth and power are illuminated by the “daylight of honour and approbation”.<sup>21</sup>

Not to remain in the shadows, conquer this light for themselves too, this is what people aspire to, according to Smith: “To be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation”<sup>22</sup> are the advantages people wish to obtain by ascending the social

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19 *TMS*, p. 50.

20 Decisive for Smith’s account on sympathy for the rich and powerful is Hume’s contribution on this topic in the *Treatise*. Cf. D. Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, P.H. Nidditch, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1978, II.II.5.

21 *TMS*, p. 51. On the asymmetries of sympathy with respect to the suffering of the poor and the happiness of the rich, and on the processes of identification with the latter which determine their imitation and lead to the social exclusion of the poor, see L. Bréban, *Sensitivity to prosperity and adversity: What would a Smithian function of happiness look like?*, in “European Journal of the History of Economic Thought”, 19, 4, 2012, pp. 551-586; A. Alvarez, J. Hurtado, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Modern Economics, Social Interactions, and Smith’s Sympathy*, in “Iberian Journal of the History of Economic Thought”, 2, 1, 2015, pp. 1-20.

22 *TMS*, p. 50.

ladder. They direct all their efforts to it not only and not so much for the advantages or for the prosperity that derive from it, but rather for the approval, admiration and esteem that accompany it.

Fully aware that “our credit and rank in the society”, as well as “the respect of our equals”,<sup>23</sup> depends largely, although not exclusively,<sup>24</sup> on the possession of external goods, they desire them as a means to satisfy a deeper aspiration: that of the social and public recognition that they ensure. And it is based on this aspiration that Smith ultimately explains both the phenomena of competitiveness and competition<sup>25</sup> motivated by individual ambition, and the enactment, on a collective level, of certain aesthetic and behavioral models. A good example is provided, in this sense, by the phenomenon of fashion that Smith sees as “a particular species”<sup>26</sup> of custom, resulting precisely from the human tendency to admire and imitate the rich and powerful. Since they have primacy in social esteem and attention, they are automatically recognised as models to follow and to be inspired by in order to be able, at least in part, to enjoy the same esteem and attention that surround them: “The graceful, the easy, and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it”.<sup>27</sup> Even if what they wear is “indifferent”, our imagination keeps linking it to the magnificence that usually characterises people of their rank and, “on account of this relation, [it seems] to have something about it that is genteel and magnificent too”.<sup>28</sup>

This mechanism, Smith observes, works not only in relation to clothing but also to behavior. The power of the public recognition enjoyed by those at the top of human societies is such that people, in order to be able to resemble them, go as far as to imitate them also in their “vices and follies”,<sup>29</sup> and are willing to pretend to have qualities that they do not possess or that

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23 *TMS*, p. 212.

24 Smith points out that our character as well as our behaviours are important elements in acquiring social credit. However, unlike what a virtuous person might wish, these are not the only aspects taken into consideration, and even less, the most decisive ones. Cf. *TMS*, p. 213.

25 On the links between competition for social esteem and competition in the economic market, cf. among others A. Kalyvas, I. Katznelson, *The Rhetoric of the Market: Adam Smith on Recognition, Speech, and Exchange*, in “The Review of Politics”, 63, 3, 2001, pp. 549-579.

26 *TMS*, p. 194.

27 *TMS*, pp. 194-195.

28 *TMS*, p. 195.

29 *TMS*, p. 64.

they intimately disapprove of, just because they belong to their “models”. That is how we get coxcombs, who are convinced that mimicking the poses and attitudes of kings and princes makes them like them; or the hypocrites, who know very well that they have none of the qualities that are the object of public admiration, but who, if vain, pretend to possess the external ones, such as wealth, and if astute, the internal ones, such as religiosity or virtue.<sup>30</sup>

Through this small gallery of obsessively “mimetic” individuals, Smith emphasises one of the potentially negative implications of the imitative impulse towards the rich and powerful. Although it is necessary in order “to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society”, it constitutes, at the same time, “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments”.<sup>31</sup> More than ensuring success, it risks causing both moral and economic ruin.<sup>32</sup> Fuelled by self-love, the desire to be pleased with oneself while seeing one’s reflection in the admired and sympathetic gaze of society exposes the individual to fatal inauthenticity, making mimesis a sort of “cosmetics”, even of a moral nature. Hence the willingness to pretend, conceal, deceive, in the illusion that, once a position of power has been conquered, the resulting “lustre” will completely cover “the foulness of the steps”<sup>33</sup> that led the person to success.

The rather merciless portrait that Smith paints of these essentially inauthentic personalities does not, however, lead to a condemnation either of the imitative disposition typical of human beings, or of the human ambition connected to it. Both, in fact, have a fully legitimate object: “To deserve, to acquire, and to enjoy the respect and admiration of mankind”.<sup>34</sup> The point, Smith maintains, is that this common object can be pursued through “two different roads”:<sup>35</sup> on the one hand the acquisition of wealth and power, on the other the pursuit of wisdom and the practice of virtue. These two paths do not necessarily diverge, especially in those medium-low ranks of society where success depends as much on professional skills as on a “prudent, just, firm, and temperate conduct”.<sup>36</sup> However, in

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30 *TMS*, p. 65.

31 *TMS*, p. 61.

32 Cf. *TMS*, pp. 64 ff. In this regard, see S. Tegos, *Adam Smith: Theorist of Corruption*, in Ch. Berry, M.P. Paganelli, C. Smith, *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, cit., in particular pp. 366-367.

33 *TMS*, p. 64.

34 *TMS*, p. 62.

35 *TMS*, p. 62.

36 *TMS*, p. 63.

the higher ranks more often than not they do not coincide at all. According to Smith, at the courts of sovereigns, where success is often linked to the “fanciful and foolish favour of ignorant, presumptuous, and proud superiors”, to be favoured are “the external graces, the frivolous accomplishments of that impertinent and foolish thing called a man of fashion” to the detriment of the “solid”<sup>37</sup> virtues of those who carry out their professional activity with wisdom and balance.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, regardless of the specific social contexts and of the aspects that in each of them seem more readily to ensure public recognition, according to Smith, these two paths appear to each individual in terms of two different character “models”, from which one can take inspiration and shape oneself and one’s behaviour: “the one, of proud ambition and ostentatious avidity” and that of “humble modesty and equitable justice”.<sup>39</sup> The respective power of attraction is, Smith maintains, radically different, and directly dependent on the most immediate, although superficial, effect of the former in terms of public recognition. In fact, whereas the one “forc[es] itself upon the notice of every wandering eye” because “more gaudy and glittering in its colouring”, the other attracts only the attention of the “most studious and careful” observer.<sup>40</sup> The latter, while being “more correct and more exquisitely”,<sup>41</sup> is devoid of that dazzling semblance that immediately draws the admiring gaze of people. Consequently, compared to “great mob of mankind” that accounts for the “admirers and worshipers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshipers, of wealth and greatness”,<sup>42</sup> only a small group really admires wisdom and virtue.

### 3. *The mimetic artist and the impartial spectator: moral recognition*

The search for wisdom and virtue, although in some cases it may appear alternative to that of wealth and power, does not imply for Smith a contempt for fame or glory, but rather the desire to obtain it when it is right

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37 *TMS*, p. 63.

38 On Smith’s open criticism of the aristocracy, in the name of the values of the new bourgeois society, see P. Donatelli, *Etica. I classici, le teorie e le linee evolutive*, Einaudi, Torino 2015, p. 336.

39 *TMS*, pp. 62 and 63.

40 *TMS*, p. 62.

41 *TMS*, p. 62.

42 *TMS*, p. 62.

and due. This desire inspires a real love for virtue which, within Smith's ethical device, coincides with the love for self-approval, that the wise and virtuous consider "alone sufficient, and [they are] contented with it".<sup>43</sup> In judging and evaluating themselves, in fact, people disregard the primacy of the sympathetic feelings of the real spectators, i.e. of the "man without", and rather give priority to those of "man within", that is to say, the ideal impartial spectator,<sup>44</sup> asking themselves whether such an onlooker may or may not sympathise with their conduct and approve of it.

As a result, one further and decisive relational dynamic comes to the fore in the definition of moral recognition: that between the subject and the man within, that is, the imaginary and well-informed impartial spectator. Although this takes place in the inner space of moral conscience, it is not without a mimetic dimension. Precisely in the relationship that the wise and virtuous person establishes with the impartial spectator, Smith finds indeed a further and morally paradigmatic function of mimesis.

The wise and virtuous are identified based on their ability to continually examine their own conduct in the same light in which a sympathetic impartial spectator would see it. What for many represents an episodic or discontinuous effort, hindered by the egoistic drive of self-love and by the self-deceit that it engenders,<sup>45</sup> is for the wise and virtuous person a habit, that is, the result of a true training in "modelling" or "endeavouring to model, not only [their] outward conduct and behaviour, but, as much as [they] can, even [their] inward sentiments and feelings, according to those of this awful and respectable judge".<sup>46</sup> The objective of this process of tak-

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43 *TMS*, p. 117.

44 On this key figure in Smith's ethics and on its function in relation to the development of an autonomous capacity for judgment, see: S. Fleischacker, *Philosophy in Moral Practice: Kant and Adam Smith*, in "Kant-Studien", 82, 1991; A. Firth, *Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy as Ethical Self-formation*, in G. Cockfield, A. Firth and J. Laurent (eds.), *New Perspectives on Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham and Northampton 2007, pp. 106 ff.; D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator. Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007; E. Lecaldano, *Simpatia*, Cortina, Milano 2013, pp. 52-59; F. Forman-Barzilai, *Adam Smith and the Circle of Sympathy. Cosmopolitanism and Moral Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010; S. Songhorian, *Sentire e agire. L'etica della simpatia tra sentimentalismo e razionalismo*, Mimesis, Milano 2016, pp. 122 ff.

45 On the link between self-love and self-deceit, I refer the reader to M. Anzalone, *Mentire a se stessi. Male e coscienza morale in Adam Smith e Immanuel Kant*, in R. Garaventa, O. Brino (eds.), *Il male e le sue forme. Riconsiderazioni moderne e contemporanee di un problema antico*, in "Itinerari", 2017, pp. 31-47.

46 *TMS*, p. 147.

ing on the feelings of the impartial spectator is full identification, thanks to which the wise and virtuous “almost become [themselves] that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of [their] conduct directs [them] to feel”.<sup>47</sup>

But, given that the impartial spectator is a fictitious figure, how is this process of imitative identification to be understood? It entails first of all the identification with a neutral feeling, free from the partiality and conditioning of self-love that commonly characterise human evaluations. Consequently, it requires the control of one’s selfish passions and it implies renouncing the idea that one’s feelings are universal models and measures of appropriateness. The aim is to adopt new feelings, based on an idea of “exact propriety and perfection”<sup>48</sup> of character and conduct. The wise and virtuous are such precisely because they measure themselves against this idea, which, in line with the empiricist horizon in which Smith develops his theory, is progressively formed in all human beings based on repeated observations and self-observations, but which is all the more precise, the more these observations have been conducted with sensitivity and accuracy.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike the majority of individuals, who assess themselves based on the ordinarily achieved “degree of approximation” to this idea, the wise and virtuous distinguish themselves by the constant attempt to assimilate their own character to the model of this “archetype of perfection”.<sup>50</sup> Imitating it means, however, to imitate “the work of a divine artist, which can never be equalled”.<sup>51</sup> This is then an attempt to fully correspond to an instance of absolute impartiality, as conveyed by the impartial spectator, but which, par excellence, belongs only to God and his “tribunal”.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the wise

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47 *TMS*, p. 147.

48 *TMS*, p. 247.

49 Smith compares this idea to an image with more or less clear outlines and more or less vivid colours, depending on how attentively and scrupulously each individual examines their own conduct and that of others. Its formation process is presented as “the slow, gradual, and progressive work” of the impartial spectator, since this latter embodies the need for complete impartiality and full information, and on this ground the idea of impartiality develops in the human mind. Cf. *TMS*, p. 247.

50 *TMS*, p. 247.

51 *TMS*, p. 247.

52 In some paragraphs, added in the fourth edition, Smith contrasts the “inferior” tribunal of society with the “superior” tribunal of the impartial spectator, to which we can appeal against the often erroneous sentences that others issue. However, when everyone condemns us and, despite the support of the man within, this throws us into despair, we can find consolation in thinking about the divine tribunal and about divine justice, that ultimately embodies the authentic universality and impartiality of judgment. Cf. *TMS*, pp. 128 ff.

and virtuous person cannot fail to notice “in how many different features the mortal copy falls short of the immortal original”.<sup>53</sup> While establishing an explicit parallel with the imitative arts,<sup>54</sup> Smith observes that wise people are in a position analogous to that of the great artist, in that they are “more sensible than any man” and they assess the gap between their action and that ideal perfection that they “imitate as well as [they] can, but which [they] despair of ever equalling”.<sup>55</sup> But, while for the artist the mimetic effort is limited to artistic production, for the wise and virtuous person it is much more burdensome, because it affects all areas of existence.

Since in their mind the idea of ideal perfection is particularly clear and detailed, all the more they perceive the disparity between this normative model and their conduct. Here too, however, the asymptotic nature of the effort of this sort of mimetic artist does not diminish their value but rather contributes to the moral beauty<sup>56</sup> of their character and behaviour. Their lucid awareness of the difficulties in imitating a model of ideal perfection translates, in fact, into the ability to contain the egoistic expansion of self-love and the deceptive self-justification that derives from it. While reaching a level higher than that of common morality, they feel a “very moderate estimation of [their] own merit”, and at the same time, have a “full sense of the merit of other people”.<sup>57</sup> Their “real modesty” clearly sets them apart from those who, content with assuming ordinary perfection as their criterion of evaluation, have less awareness of their moral weaknesses and indulge in presumptuous, proud self-admiration. The latter, Smith bitterly remarks, often “dazzles the multitude”,<sup>58</sup> ensuring an easy but superficial recognition; what the

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53 *TMS*, p. 247.

54 The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is rich in analogies between ethical and aesthetic experience, that can be explained in reference to the decisive role that perception and imagination play in Smith’s moral epistemology. In this regard, see: J.R. Harrison, *Imagination and Aesthetics in Adam Smith’s Epistemology and Moral Philosophy*, in “Contributions to Political Economy”, 14, 1995, pp. 91-111; C. Griswold, *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 110 ff.; R. Fudge, *Sympathy, Beauty, and Sentiment: Adam Smith’s Aesthetic Morality*, in “Journal of Scottish Philosophy”, 7, 2, 2009, pp. 133-146.

55 *TMS*, p. 249.

56 Once again we can point to the close similarity with what Smith claims about the imitative arts and, specifically, concerning imitation between objects of different genres, where the beauty of imitation is seen as proportional to the disparity between imitating and imitated object. Cf. *IA*, I.14.

57 *TMS*, p. 248.

58 *TMS*, pp. 248-249.



wise and virtuous person undertakes to achieve is, instead, a well-deserved social recognition and morally justified not by the approval of the mass, but by another ideal.

The mimetic relation with the fictitious figure of the impartial spectator illustrates how, for Smith, on a moral level, recognition does not imply an automatic homologation to the conduct that is the object of general esteem and admiration within the community of reference. Although it is true that the relation with the impartial spectator could never be established in the absence of a social relationship with real spectators,<sup>59</sup> since it arises following the experience of their partiality and fallacy of judgment, this does not entail a passive and undisputed internalization.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, the impartial spectator stands for the configuration of a space of independence and evaluative autonomy, by virtue of which behaviours disapproved of by real external spectators may be adopted for the sake of the sympathy they arouse in the ideal internal spectator. After all, Smith observes, the more people are able to adhere to the point of view of the impartial spectator and to evaluate themselves according to the standard of ideal perfection it embodies, the more the approval or disapproval of other real people loses in importance.<sup>61</sup>

#### 4. *Mimesis, normativity and recognition*

In the light of what has been seen so far, a clear link emerges in Smith's accounts between mimesis, fiction and recognition, substantiated by a corresponding theory of mimesis. This latter is understood not as a direct

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59 According to Smith, if we were to grow up in a situation of total isolation, without any intersubjective relationship with real spectators, not only would we not be able to imagine the impartial spectator, but we would also be deprived of the ability to formulate any kind of judgment about ourselves. The first criteria of judgment, the first ideas on what is right, what is good, and what is beautiful, in fact, come from the others.

60 The non-coincidence between the point of view of the impartial spectator and that of society is repeated by Smith himself in his reply to the objections that Gilbert Elliot raised in the aftermath of the publication of the first edition of the *Theory*. To avoid any misunderstanding, Smith revised the text, adding some paragraphs concerning the role of the impartial spectator. Cf. *TMS*, pp. 113 ff. In this regard, see D.D. Raphael, *The Impartial Spectator*, cit., pp. 36 ff.

61 This obviously does not mean a total indifference to the judgment of social spectators, which can certainly shake and upset the moral conscience, although, according to Smith, it cannot completely modify its judgments; cf. *TMS*, pp. 130-131.

process of linear identification between the imitating and the imitated, but rather as a dual relationship mediated by the reference to a third element.<sup>62</sup> This third element is, as matter of fact, a normative model whose defining traits determine the various aspects of recognition and also the positive or negative impact of fictional mechanisms.

On a purely emotional level, this model is made of our feelings and passions. What we usually experience firsthand on a daily basis becomes the scheme to which we turn, in the first instance, to decode and try to “copy” the feelings of others, as well as to evaluate their appropriateness. At this level, what is mimetic is first of all the imagination that supports the identification effort using a series of fictional devices, thanks to which the spectator exchanges places with the actor. Whereas in this case the fiction performs a positive function and, rather than opposing reality, allows a better understanding of it, when we transition to behavioural mimesis this function becomes more ambivalent.

In behavioural mimesis the relationship between the imitating and the imitated presupposes the reference to models that can be found externally or internally to the individual. The external models, legitimised by public recognition, are mainly conveyed by the rich and powerful in whose condition we imagine the realisation of “the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state [...] which [...] we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires”.<sup>63</sup> The internal model, conveyed by the impartial spectator, refers instead to an idea of perfection, of absolute impartiality and fairness, which is formed, albeit more or less accurately, in all people.

In both cases, imitation is associated with being aware of the existing gap between us and the model, and involves the use of fictional mechanisms. But, while in the case of the imitation of the rich and powerful, fiction, understood as deceptive dissimulation and simulation, acts on an interpersonal level and aims to try, at least apparently, to close this gap, in the case of the imitation of the impartial spectator, it acts on an intra-personal level, placing a hurdle on the path of imitation. Fiction, in fact, translates into self-deception, in an attempt to escape, rather than adhere to the feelings of the impartial spectator, in order to cling to the selfish sentiment of self-love that legitimises and justifies even the most violent and mean passions. In

62 Cf. *IA*, I.7, p. 179. On Smith’s theory of mimesis, see among others: W. Seidel, *Zählt die Musik zu den imitativen Künsten? Zur Revision der Nachahmungsästhetik durch Adam Smith*, in J.P. Fricke (ed.), *Die Sprache der Musik: Festschrift Klaus Wolfgang Niemöller zum 60. Geburtstag*, Gustav Bosse, Regensburg 1989, pp. 495-511; J. Chandler, *Adam Smith as Critic*, cit., pp. 131 ff.

63 *TMS*, pp. 51-52.

this way, by aiming at fashioning a false image of oneself,<sup>64</sup> fiction contrasts the mimetic tension towards the impartial spectator. However, it is also true that, when exercised as an ability to create such a fictitious image, it is an indispensable tool for the very originating of that imitative process which represents the highest moral challenge for every person.

Granted that both fiction and mimesis, although closely connected to the articulated process of recognition, are not necessarily the cause of more or less hypocritical moral conformism, where to look for it then? According to Smith, a deciding factor is the type of desire<sup>65</sup> that triggers mimesis and the fictional mechanisms associated with it and that also guides the search for recognition. In his opinion, in fact, people desire: “not only praise, but praiseworthiness; or to be that thing which, though it should be praised by nobody, is, however, the natural and proper object of praise”.<sup>66</sup> When an uncontrolled self-love makes the desire for effective praise prevail over that for well deserved praise, people favour mere public recognition, adapting to successful behavioural models, even if they are not morally respectable and shareable.

Smith, however, is optimistically confident that, in every “well-formed mind”, the desire to be worthy of approval and praise is more strongly present, and this is a desire that inspires a true love for virtue. When this latter prevails,<sup>67</sup> primacy is granted to moral recognition, the reference model is that conveyed by the impartial spectator, and mimesis contrasts, rather than indulging, the claims of blind self-love. In this situation, the more continuous the mimetic effort, the more the individual will be able to appeal to the “inner tribunal” and dispense with social confirmation.

It might seem paradoxical and contradictory to believe, as Smith does, that imitation is also essential for the establishment of the self-evaluative

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64 In this regard, I refer the reader to M. Anzalone, *L'immagine di sé. Coscienza morale e duplicità dell'io in Adam Smith*, in “Estetica. Studi e ricerche”, VIII, 2, 2018, pp. 309-321.

65 As Elena Pulcini pointed out, especially in the mimetic relationship with the rich and powerful, Smith outlines the same mimetic configuration of desire investigated, in more recent times, by René Girard, who sees in it the core structure of the social relationship. Cf. E. Pulcini, *Riconoscimento, autenticità, autoriconoscimento*, in C. Mancina, P. Valenza, P. Vinci (eds.), *Riconoscimento e comunità. A partire da Hegel*, in “Archivio di Filosofia”, LXXVII, 2-3, 2009, p. 211.

66 *TMS*, p. 114.

67 Concerns have been raised on this priority claim, which is seen as inaccurate on the descriptive level and as disadvantageous on the regulatory level. See G. Brennan, *Self-esteem and social esteem: Is Adam Smith right?*, in “Human Affairs”, 30, 3, 2020, pp. 302-315.

dimension, that defines moral recognition and turns this latter into a sort of self-recognition.<sup>68</sup> However, in actual terms, the recourse to imitation also in the moral context is perfectly consistent with the structure of Smith's ethics. Based on the affective and perceptive experience of the individual, namely on feeling sympathetically understood, Smith's ethical theory can never be divorced from the reference to the feelings of others.<sup>69</sup> As they express approval or disapproval, they are the first to push us to imitate the behaviours recognised as worthy of praise and avoid those deserving of contempt,<sup>70</sup> in a process of progressive and reciprocal correction that finds its highest expression in the figure of the impartial spectator. Referring to this spectator's sympathetic feelings, therefore, does not exclude imitation at all, but rather determines its direction: the spectator's compass will not be the feelings that others actually feel, but those they should feel if they were impartial and well-informed. And it is precisely in the ability to keep these two levels distinct, wishing not only to look like we are "made" for society, but to really be it,<sup>71</sup> that according to Smith one can avoid reducing the vital need for recognition to a vain conformist exercise merely seeking social approval and public consensus.

In this respect, Smith openly reacts to those, like Mandeville, who detach recognition from the desire for well-deserved praise, and rather link it to the mere desire for praise, which is fuelled by pride and "self-liking".<sup>72</sup>

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68 Cf. E. Pulcini, *Riconoscimento, autenticità, autoriconoscimento*, cit.; the author, however, sees this domain as fundamentally alien to mimetic dynamics, which instead define social recognition.

69 As Smith makes clear while arguing with Mandeville (cf. *TMS*, pp. 308 ff.), this reference is not in itself a sign of vanity. On the subject, see among others: J. McHugh, *Pursuing Sympathy without Vanity: Interpreting Smith's Critique of Rousseau through Smith's Critique of Mandeville*, in M.P. Paganelli, D.C. Rasmussen, and C. Smith, *Adam Smith and Rousseau: Ethics, Politics, Economics*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018, pp. 109-124; B. Walraevens, *Vanity, pride and self-deceit: Excessive self-esteem in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in "Review of Economic Philosophy", 20, 2, 2019, pp. 3-39.

70 One should bear in mind, moreover, that, according to Smith, the authority of those general rules of conduct, which allow us to adopt appropriate behaviours even in the absence of appropriate feelings, is based on the motivating power of sympathetic feelings. In this case, there is neither hypocrisy, nor dissimulation, nor a form of utilitarian egoism, but rather an awareness of the weakness and conflictuality that often characterises our feelings, combined with respect for that "principle of the greatest consequence in human life" which is the "sense of duty", to which the impartial spectator defers us. *TMS*, pp. 162 ff.

71 See *TMS*, p. 117.

72 Cf. B. Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. by F.B. Kaye, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1924, 2 voll., in particular I, p. 137 and II, pp. 129-132. On the relation-

Furthermore, he also takes a stand against those, like Rousseau,<sup>73</sup> who provide a radically negative account of the mimetic dynamics triggered by the need for recognition, while establishing a linear connection between this latter and the assembling of fictitious identities, which would be then shaped based entirely on social expectations.<sup>74</sup> In opposition to this viewpoint, according to which the need for recognition leads to social conflicts and moral corruption and the subject is held hostage to other people's judgement, Smith presents a clearly more optimistic theory.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, he sees recognition as the vehicle of both individual growth and social integration. He also believes its effects to be measurable not only with respect to the social modulation and harmonization of individual feelings, but also with respect to the development of an autonomous faculty of moral judgement.

Smith does not deny that experiencing the conditioning and pressure of other people's expectations can provoke in those longing for recognition some behaviours leaning on compliant and more or less utilitarianistic homologation. Nevertheless, he sees these experiences as key to learning how to recreate in the inner space of one's individual conscience the normative instance of control which is embodied in the first place by society. Certainly, should this recreation be a mere mechanical duplicate with no emanci-

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ship between Smith and Mandeville, see also P. Sagar, *Smith and Rousseau, after Hume and Mandeville*, in "Political Theory", 46, 1, 2016, pp. 29-58. Sagar claims that, concerning these matters, Smith mainly engages in a conversation with Mandeville, rather than with Rousseau.

- 73 Cf. B. Carnevali, *Romantisme et Reconnaissance. Figures de la conscience chez Rousseau*, Droz, Genève 2012.
- 74 See, in particular, *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), where, as Honneth remarks, Rousseau outlines a "negative" theory of recognition (A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, cit., Chap. 2). Among the most recent contributions on the philosophical dialogue between Smith and Rousseau, see: D.C. Rasmussen, *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Societies. Adam Smith's Response to Rousseau*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park 2006; C. Fricke, *The Role of Interpersonal Comparisons in Moral Learning and the Sources of Recognition Respect: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's amour-propre and Adam Smith's Sympathy*, in M.P. Paganelli, D.C. Rasmussen, and C. Smith, *Adam Smith and Rousseau*, cit., pp. 55-79; C. Griswold, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith. A Philosophical Encounter*, Routledge, New York 2018.
- 75 Honneth insists on this aspect and identifies in Rousseau and Smith two opposite paradigms of recognition, which, developing under specific social and cultural conditions, diverge in their understanding of recognition as well as of its effects on the individual and society. Cf. A. Honneth, *Anerkennung. Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, cit., in particular Chap. 5 where the author compares the two models.

pation from the original, it might prove detrimental for the moral identity of the subject. A mere copy stands in fact for an individual deprived of the ability to develop an autonomous instance of self-control. Also in this case, similarly to what happens in the realm of art, mimesis accomplishes its task provided it does not cancel out, but preserves, through similarity, the gap between the imitating and the imitated.

The gap and discrepancy, which in Smith's aesthetic contributions bestow artistic value on mimesis, while establishing its difference from mechanically reproductive imitation, is then also a distinctive feature of Smith's understanding of recognition. This is in fact the far-reaching result of one's awareness, developed through sympathy, that among each individual lived experience there is neither absolute discrepancy nor absolute identity. This original awareness that it is possible to sympathetically share feelings, grasping similarity and possibly uniformity, although what is felt by others is never exactly replicated and discrepancy never fades away, is, according to Smith, both the main precondition and the main motive for the quest for recognition. Both at individual and affective level, this quest develops under the sign of a neither impossible nor absolute mimesis, which is imperfect by definition.\*

\* I would like to thank Tessa Marzotto Caotorta for the translation of this text.

SECTION 2  
MIND AND RECOGNITION





# EMPATHY AND RECOGNITION

Anna Donise

## *Abstract*

The concept of “recognition” is traditionally linked to the ethical and social dimension of the human being. The paper proposes a different history of this concept, linking it to the sphere of knowledge. The story starts from Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, in particular from the aesthetic judgement, and finds a fundamental stage in the reflection of the Munich philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps. For Lipps, the capacity to recognise (objects or other subjects) is closely intertwined with and dependent on the emotional dimension and on our empathic capacity (*Einfühlung*). Empathic recognition is a way of knowing the world, although it is constantly exposed to misunderstandings and mistakes that can lead to misinterpretation and misrecognition of objects and other subjects. In conclusion, the text argues for the need to distinguish between empathic-cognitive recognition, which recognises the characteristics of the “object” in question, and the recognition of the (ethical, aesthetic or social) value that this “object” is intended to have.

*Keywords:* Aesthetic Judgement, Lipps, Emotions, Knowledge, Misrecognition.

## 1. *Recognitions*

The contemporary use of the German word *Anerkennung* – rendered in neo-Latin languages, but also in English, with terms derived from the Latin *recognōscere* (the compound of *re-* and *cognōscere*) – concerns almost exclusively the human ethical and social dimension. The term became philosophically relevant with the Hegelian *Kampf um Anerkennung*,<sup>1</sup> and became the object of a renewed interest in the 1990s following its reformulation in the ‘recognition theory’.<sup>2</sup> In this perspective, the concept of

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1 The pages on the struggle for recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are well known. On this subject, I will only refer to L. Siep, H. Ikäheimo, M. Quante, *Handbuch Anerkennung*, Springer, Berlin 2021.

2 It was especially Axel Honneth who took up the concept of *Struggle for Recognition* in his 1992 *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer*

‘recognition’ is intertwined with that of ‘identity’, and it can be argued that the struggles for equal rights – of workers, ethnic minorities, women or the LGBTQ+ community – should be understood as struggles for the recognition of the different identities at stake. Framing these political movements in terms of recognition highlights the inherently relational character of morality and justice: justice is not exclusively concerned with how many possessions a person should have, but rather what kind of position he or she has or should have towards other people.<sup>3</sup>

Today, however, some authors are highlighting the limited scope of the concept of recognition thus understood.<sup>4</sup> A distinction is therefore being proposed between a narrower understanding of recognition, according to which only those who can recognise can be recognised, and a wider conception that does not accept this limitation, arguing that the notion of recognition should not be tied to two-way reciprocity. In this second version, it is also possible to recognise other beings in addition to those who are, themselves, capable of recognition. This perspective, being broader, tends to encompass the first.

This line of interpretation partly draws – more or less consciously – on the prevailing conception of “*Anerkennung*” in the German philosophy of the first half of the 20th century. Authors as diverse as Frege, Husserl, Rickert or Lipps regarded recognition as a process closely linked to the sphere of knowledge. If, according to Frege, to judge means essentially to recognise (*anerkennen*) the truth of a thought,<sup>5</sup> for Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* the recognition (*Anerkennung*) of the judgment act is what

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*Konflikte. The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1995, but the subject has also been widely investigated in Ch. Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992 pp. 25-73, and in J. Habermas, *Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State*, in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, cit., pp. 107-148.

- 3 M. Iser, *Recognition* in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>>. Cf. also I. M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990.
- 4 Cf. A. Laitinen, *On the Scope of ‘Recognition’*. *The Role of Adequate Regard and Mutuality*, in H.-C. Schmidt am Busch, C. Zurn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2010, pp. 319-342.
- 5 G. Frege, *Der Gedanke. Eine logische Untersuchung*, in “Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus”, 1, 1918/9, pp. 58-77.

allows us to approve a representation.<sup>6</sup> According to these authors, in short, recognition is a fundamental step in the cognitive process, which is broadly addressed to representations and not exclusively to other subjects.

The same theme was developed by the Baden neo-Kantian school and, in particular, by Rickert. According to the latter, reality has a claim (Rickert uses the term *Forderung*<sup>7</sup>) on the subject, which is not passive in its knowledge of the world but is rather called upon to an activity of affirmation or negation; that is, it recognises the form of objects and, more generally, of reality. The recognition of the forms of the real, which makes claims on the subject,<sup>8</sup> determines our knowledge of empirical reality. In our cognition, in fact, we affirm or deny something, and the dimension of feeling plays a fundamental role in this process: it is in fact a “feeling of pleasure or displeasure”<sup>9</sup> that determines our affirmation or denial, that is, our recognition of things. In every act of knowledge we feel evidence that obliges us to judge thus and not otherwise. “When I want to judge, I am bound by the feeling of evidence, I cannot arbitrarily affirm or deny”.<sup>10</sup> Form presents itself as something that demands recognition, something that *must* be affirmed.<sup>11</sup>

6 Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen, Zweiter Teil. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*, hrsg. U. Panzer, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1984; trans. eng. by D. Moran, *Logical Investigations Volume 2*. Routledge, Milton Park 2006, V, § 29.

7 The theme of *Aufforderung* (usually translated into English as “summons”) is found in Fichte’s *Naturrecht*. Fichte understands it as a kind of external check (*Anstoss*) that prompts the subject to activity and enables it to find itself while leaving it “in full possession of its freedom to be self-determining”. See J.G. Fichte. *Foundations of Natural Right According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre* [1796], ed. Frederick Neuhouser, tr. M. Baur, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, §3, III.

8 The subject is obviously understood as consciousness in general. In fact, it is important to emphasise that this process takes place on a transcendental rather than empirical level: reality demands recognition, but once its form has been predicated it falls within the immanence of consciousness. In the first part of the first edition of *Der Gegenstand* (which remains unchanged in the second) Rickert clarifies the relationship between the empirical subject and the transcendental subject or consciousness in general. The latter is a kind of borderline idea opposing everything that can be contained in it (including empirical consciousness or the psychological subject). Cf. H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Einführung in die Transzendentalphilosophie*, Mohr, Tübingen 1904, pp. 11.

9 H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der philosophischen Transcendenz*, J.C.B. Mohr, Freiburg 1892, p. 57.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

11 H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1904), cit., p. 116.

## 2. The other Kant

The idea that recognition is a gnoseological process involving our relationship with the world in general, and not exclusively with other subjects, thus develops another side of the concept that does not originate from Kant's practical philosophy and the "feeling of respect" (*Achtung*), but rather from the meaning Kant attributes to reflective judgement in the third *Critique*. For many early 20th-century authors who can be broadly placed within the Kantian tradition, the problem of knowledge, addressed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is not fully resolved by the relationship between categories and the world, according to which the only valid knowledge is the scientific-natural kind. If we define nature as "the existence of things, insofar as that existence is determined according to universal laws",<sup>12</sup> individual and singular reality escapes this definition. In this perspective, 'nature' is only the object of investigation of the natural sciences – a concept that is too connoted in terms of universal laws to describe our actual relationship with our surroundings. The third *Critique*, however, represents Kant's attempt to resolve or at least smooth out this difficulty: there are other forms of knowledge and relation to the world, the validity of which is not universal and necessary, but subjective because it is linked to pleasure and displeasure.

In particular, it was Rickert who developed and broadened the epistemological potential of the first type of reflective judgement, i.e. the aesthetic judgement (or judgement of taste), in which Kant had outlined a form of knowledge that concerns the individual and involves pleasure and displeasure. It is important to note that Kant here speaks of "judgement" even though he refers to an activity that is not directly aimed at knowledge. Rather, in the aesthetic judgment representation is not linked to a concept, but to a feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Pleasure does not say anything about the object, but makes it manifest how "the subject feels himself, [namely] how he is affected by the presentation".<sup>13</sup> After all, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure is nothing more than the "vital force" of the subject.

Now, Kant does not use the word "judgement" at random, because if it is true that the aesthetic judgement "designates nothing whatsoever in

12 I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. G. Hatfield, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, §14, p. 46.

13 Cf. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1987, p. 44.

the object”, it is also true that this relationship between perception and the feeling of pleasure does tell us *something*. What is predicated in aesthetic judgement is not placed on the objective side, but rather on the subjective side of the relationship. Kant clarifies:

The green color of meadows belongs to objective sensation, i.e., to the perception of an object of sense [...] to feeling [...] through which the object is regarded as an object of our liking (which is not a cognition of it).<sup>14</sup>

The fact remains that pleasantness, while being a subjective sensation, refers to the object as its quality. Kant writes:

What is strange and different about a judgment of taste is only this: that what is to be connected with the presentation of the object is not an empirical concept but a feeling of pleasure (hence no concept at all), though, just as if it were a predicate connected with cognition of the object, this feeling is nevertheless to be required of everyone.<sup>15</sup>

Pleasantness is therefore only a subjective property, but at the same time it also concerns the “green meadow” phenomenon, because it is a property of its manifestation. In this sense the judgement of taste does say something of what we perceive: it tells us that it is beautiful, pleasant, agreeable, even if to say of a green lawn that it is pleasant does not mean “to know something that belongs to its content, but only to highlight a general condition of its manifestation”.<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic judgment is therefore a way of knowing the object that directly involves the subject and their feelings. But how are we to think of this sentimental activation? As we have seen, Kant speaks of pleasure and displeasure, and Rickert takes up this element by considering the transcendental subject no longer as a representational self but as a judgmental self, which is questioned by the object. Thus knowledge in general, when concerning our relationship with the world around us in its individuality and singularity, is configured as a process in which the norm (which is the form of the object) imposes itself and claims to be recognised. But the whole recognition process is determined through feelings, and “feelings, considered from a psychological point of view, are pleasure or displeasure”.<sup>17</sup>

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14 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

16 P. Spinicci, *Lezioni sulle proprietà espressive*, [www.filosofia.unimi.it](http://www.filosofia.unimi.it), 2013/14, p. 15.

17 H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1904), cit., p. 106.

### 3. *The role of feeling in recognition: empathy*

However, how this feeling of pleasure and displeasure, which acquires such an important role in our relationship with the world, should be thought of remains unclear in the neo-Kantian discussion.

A very important contribution to the investigation of the feeling involved in the recognition of the world around us comes instead from the Munich psychologist and philosopher Theodor Lipps. Lipps, too, describes our way of knowing the world in terms of recognition and response to a demand. The real difference (at least as far as we are concerned here) with respect to the transcendental framework of the neo-Kantian Rickert lies in Lipps's 'psychologism', for which logical, aesthetic or ethical laws are essentially laws that concern our psychic processes, through which we know, appreciate and evaluate the facts with which we relate. It is the facts, in this perspective, that make claims (*Forderung*) and demand recognition (*Anerkennung*).

It is now a matter of understanding how our sentimental activation works, i.e. what it means that we experience pleasure and displeasure in relation to things and what it means that this pleasure and displeasure are part of the cognitive process we call recognition. Lipps's hypothesis is that we are emotionally activated by things (by their shape, their structure, how they move, etc.) and that this happens through a kind of mimetic mechanism, according to which we feel pleasure or displeasure 'in' the thing and not 'in front of' it. The object mimetically awakens our experiences with its characteristics: the clearest example is perhaps that of melody, in which I recognise "an aspiration to flee or a tendency to contain oneself," yet all this is nothing more than my activity, my vital inner movement, but objectified.<sup>18</sup>

The interesting element is that even though these are forms in which the life of the self is reified in the object – the sweetness of a melody or the threatening nature of a storm – "they immediately appear to me as real objects",<sup>19</sup> as if they were qualities present in the object and not due to the self. A melody cannot only be described through the individual notes that compose it, but also requires mentioning its qualitative and emotional aspects. Its sweet, haunting or distressing nature is an essential part of its being an object for me. This experience is viewed by Lipps as a character-

18 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, in *Leitfaden der Psychologie*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1909, cap. XIII, pp. 222-241, p. 225.

19 *Ibid.*

istic of our relationship with the world. When an object exists for me and demands recognition, “it is by no means just something sensibly given, in the same way as a house is not a mere pile of bricks”; together with matter, in fact, there is form. But form “is my activity”. Every determined object “is necessarily permeated by my life”.<sup>20</sup> And it is precisely this ability to objectify our emotional life in the world around us that Lipps calls empathy (*Einfühlung*).<sup>21</sup>

Lipps considers the object as the result of two components, “that is, of what is sensibly given and of my activity”. Things “demand recognition” and awaken my activity, which is not arbitrary, but “necessary”: to become objects with which I relate, things must be interpenetrated by my activity through a “self-activation” which involves recognising in the object characteristics that awaken subjective activity. Just as in Kant’s aesthetic judgement, the subject feels itself (its vital feeling) in the object. As mentioned above, this type of emotional activation is defined by Lipps as “empathising” (*Einfühlen*). It is a sentimental, not a physiological activation, for empathising “does not mean to have the sensation (*empfinden*) of something in one’s own body, but rather to feel (*fühlen*) something in the object”.<sup>22</sup>

With this concept of empathy Lipps makes an important contribution to the full appreciation of the epistemological potential of the judgement of taste, transforming it from a reflective to a determining judgement: feeling determines our knowledge of the world around us, and is one of the three

20 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, in “Die Zukunft”, 54, 1906, pp. 100-114, here pp. 105-106.

21 As his student Moritz Geiger pointed out, in Lipps’s framework “this apprehension of things as empathy of one’s own apprehension represents the psychological reinterpretation of the synthetic unity of Kantian apperception”. Cf. M. Geiger, *Über das Wesen und Bedeutung der Einfühlung, in Bericht über den vierten Kongress für experimentelle Psychologie in Innsbruck vom 19. Bis 22. April 1910*, Barth, Leipzig 1911, pp. 29-73, p. 53. When I ‘apperceive’ an object, I experience a certain mode of my inner behaviour – such as joy or sadness – but “as if it belonged to the apperceived object”. Cf. Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen.*, cit., 222. Here Lipps uses the term ‘apperception’ to refer to the fact that the self ‘feels’, is present to itself, in a series of concrete acts that take place in individual consciousness. “Pleasure manifests itself insofar as a psychic process finds favourable conditions for its apperception in the soul, or insofar as it agrees with the conditions for apperception dictated by the soul”, Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. II: *Die ästhetische Betrachtung und die bildende Kunst*, Voss, Hamburg 1906, p. 11.

22 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen*, in “Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie”, 3, 2-3, 1903, pp. 185-204, here p. 202.

sources of knowledge. Together with sensory perception, through which I “know about things” in the world, and internal perception, which allows me to know “about myself”, there is in fact empathy, which is generally what allows me to grasp “the objectification of myself in an object other than myself”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the object is always

something interpenetrating with my activity. And activity is life. The word ‘life’ has really no other sense than that of ‘activity’. Therefore, every object that exists for me as this particular object – other objects do not exist for me – is necessarily and obviously interpenetrated by my life. And this is the most general sense of ‘empathy’.<sup>24</sup>

Even in the most basic example, that of a line scribbled on a piece of paper, we must acknowledge – according to Lipps – the relevance of the empathic relationship. The line is a “vehicle” of forces such as “tension and relaxation” or even “starting, proceeding and stopping”, “widening and narrowing”. But all this activity, which characterises the line as well as the relation between the line and the other elements of space, is actually “placed in things by me. Not arbitrarily, however, but necessarily”.<sup>25</sup> In essence, we cannot help but recognise things as qualitatively connoted: frightening or joyful, sad or disturbing.

Empathy, thus conceived, becomes a source of knowledge. But its characteristic is precisely that it implies a relational dimension of knowledge: I know aspects of the world, but first of all I know aspects of myself, because empathy is always the objectification of myself in the object. Empathy is a mode of being of the subject who relates to the world, whether animate or inanimate. Lipps argues that shapes, colours and movements lead us to recognise qualitative characteristics in objects – or, to say it *à la Fichte*, in the “Not-I”,<sup>26</sup> because the question concerns objects and subjects without distinction. But there is a Not-I only insofar as there is an I that intends it. The demand of the object can therefore only arise to the extent that the subject turns its spiritual gaze on it, that is it, he perceives it and recognises its characteristics.<sup>27</sup>

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23 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen*, cit., p. 222.

24 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 106.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

26 F. Fabbianelli, *Theodor Lipps' metaphysische Psychologie*, in T. Lipps, *Schriften zur Psychologie und Erkenntnistheorie*, 4 Bde., Ergon, Würzburg 2013, 1, pp. VII-LXIII.

27 F. Fabbianelli, *Il microcosmo e lo specchio. L'etica della personalità in Theodor Lipps*, in “Archivio di Storia della cultura”, XXXIV (2021), pp. 87-100.



In the brief overview I have offered so far, recognition is understood as addressed to reality as such (not only to subjects); in this view, the capacity to recognise is closely intertwined with, and dependent on, the emotional and relational dimension, thereby enhancing the cognitive role of the emotional sphere. This emotional dimension – thanks to Lipps’s contribution – has taken shape as *Einfühlung*. Thus far, however, I have only dealt with objects. It is now a question of taking the last step in the present analysis of the interweaving between recognition and empathy, investigating what happens when the object in front of me is another subject.

#### 4. *Empathy as a source of recognition of the other subject*

When I see another person, I find an expression of spontaneity and autonomous sentimental vivacity. More generally, if it is true that “every sensory object demands activity of me”,<sup>28</sup> implying a recognition, it is also true that “the highest demand is made of me by the sensory appearance of the human being”.<sup>29</sup> The demand for recognition made by another subject is obviously clearer and stronger than that of an object. One must not forget, however, that here ‘recognition’ is not to be understood as it is used by Critical Theory, in the sense that has become dominant in the philosophical debate today. Here the other subject demands to be recognised on the basis of their characteristics as another subject different from me, the bearer of an autonomous psychic life, characterised by feelings and thoughts,<sup>30</sup> without any ethical-practical connotation.

Just as when observing an object (think of the example of a melody or a stormy sea), in interpersonal *Einfühlung*, the observer, starting from the movements of the observed subject, unconsciously projects their own experiences activated by the observation of the other’s behaviour. Lipps strongly emphasises the instinctive and immediate nature of this relationship, explicitly taking a stance against the “analogical” conception, which was as popular then as it is today: one must not view empathy as a rational process, in terms of an analogy in which I imagine how I would feel if I were in the place of the other person.

Lipps’s example is well known: a spectator watching an acrobat perform a dangerous trick experiences the acrobat’s suspension “in the first

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28 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 103.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

30 The problem for Lipps is to clarify how we relate to an otherness other than ourselves.

person”;<sup>31</sup> that is, they reproduce within themselves the movements performed by the acrobat, internally imitating the actions observed and, in this way, completely identifying with the performer. The spectator becomes “one” with the observed and, at the same time, self-objectifies in the acrobat.<sup>32</sup> In authentic empathy there is no distinction between my own self and the other’s self, or rather – to continue with the example – there is neither myself nor the acrobat’s self, but rather an ideal self. Likewise, the space in which the empathic relationship takes place is also “ideal”: when we feel like we are up there with the acrobat we are not in a real place, but rather in an ideal place that is neither the tightrope on which the acrobat is walking, nor the armchair in which our real self continues to be comfortably seated.<sup>33</sup>

But how should we conceive of this “imitation”<sup>34</sup> that characterises the empathic relationship? Let us start by observing the acrobatic movements of the man on the tightrope: an insecure gait or a momentary loss of balance can produce in me, the observer sitting in my armchair, feelings of fear or an unpleasant physical sensation of vertigo. Without my being aware of it, the acrobat’s body with its movements triggers an imitative process in me. This unconscious and instinctive process happens because

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- 31 This example can be already found in Smith: “The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on a slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel they themselves must do in his situation”, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, A. Millar, A. Kincaid and J. Bell in Edinburgh, 3rd edition, 1767, p. 3.
- 32 Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, Voss, Hamburg und Leipzig 1906, p. 122.
- 33 In this sense Lipps can be considered a supporter of the so-called “actuality principle”. According to the purporters of this theoretical framework, empathic experiences become ‘actual’ experiences for those who have them: thus by empathising with the acrobat I am at one with his experience. Cf. M. Geiger, *Über das Wesen und Bedeutung der Einfühlung*, cit., p. 33.
- 34 See the Lippsian concept of imitation in Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung, innere Nachahmung, und Organempfindungen*, cit., pp. 185-204. It is interesting to note that a few years before Lipps, Gabriel Tarde had spoken of laws of imitation that characterise and ground the social world. The concept of “imitation” for Tarde is strongly connected to that of sympathy. For Tarde, every social bond consists of the “reflection of one brain into another”, but for “unilateral sympathy to develop and become mutual” it needs to be expressed. And it is precisely through imitation that – before the spoken word – reciprocal sympathy was able to manifest itself: “the tamed began to follow the tamer, to walk behind him, to do what he did, to copy his gestures” Cf. G. Tarde, *L’interpsychologie*, in “Archives d’anthropologie criminelle”, 19, 1904, pp. 536-564. See also G. Tarde, *Les lois de l’imitation: étude sociologique*, Alcan, Paris 1890.

my visual perception<sup>35</sup> of the acrobat's movements is associated with a "kinaesthetic image", which is the set of sensory contents that arise from watching the movement.

Empathy can be traced back to two human drives: the drive for vital manifestation and the drive for external imitation. The first is "the communication of internal processes by means of bodily processes," i.e. the fact that internal states, such as sadness or joy, also find expression in external gestures: from smiling to crying, from blushing to shivering. I do not experience a sad gesture, Lipps clarifies, as "something that comes with sadness, but as something present in it".<sup>36</sup> When we observe a gesture, the second drive identified by Lipps comes into play: the tendency to reproduce that gesture. But that gesture is an "inseparable component of my sadness", which leads me to also reproduce the feeling of "sadness, which forms a single experience with it".<sup>37</sup>

I thus find myself reliving the internal state I experienced when I made those gestures myself. However, this is not – I repeat – a matter of reasoning. On the contrary, all this happens on an "unconscious" level, as Lipps points out: a level that excludes awareness and that allows me to experience the other's feelings in the first person. However, just as in the relationship with objects, these feelings are attributed to the other person. The impulse to imitate drives me to a mimetic activity that is essentially internal, psychic imitation. External imitation is rather rare and largely irrelevant to the empathic dynamic while, on the contrary, "a form or degree of internal imitation and also a tendency to external imitation is always present".<sup>38</sup>

Since in the course of my life I have had certain emotional experiences and have expressed them through given gestures, even the inward reproduction of those gestures entails that I feel those affects. The gesture has become an "index" of, say, fear or joy: "the affect has attached itself [to the gesture] as that which expresses itself in it".<sup>39</sup> Insofar as the other person's

35 Lipps calls this an "optical image". Cf. Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, cit., p. 115

36 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 229. Between gesture and sentimental element there is a relationship that Lipps calls symbolic. In a polemical response to Witasek, Lipps admits in a 1904 essay that in earlier works he had mistakenly labelled the relationship between feeling and gesture as an associative one. Cf. Th. Lipps, *Weiteres zur "Einfühlung"*, in "Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie", 4, 1904, pp. 465-519, p. 466.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 483.

39 Th. Lipps, *Das Wissen vom Fremden Ichen*, in *Psychologische Untersuchungen I*, Engelmann, Leipzig 1907, pp. 694-722, p. 719.

gesture awakens an experience I have had myself, I am able to empathise with them and feel their fear or joy. I unconsciously project onto the other person the state of mind that has been awakened in *me*.

This process, however, is the reverse of that posited by analogical theories, and helps us understand the relevance of the *relational* dimension of empathy. When I am happy or angry, my facial expression is not the direct object of my perception, yet I have a fairly clear representation of what I look like when I am having those feelings, even though I do not have “a mirror at hand while anger is consuming me”. I do not need a mirror because I’ve acquired awareness of my expression “from observing the faces of others”. This is a “reversal” of the classical analogy approach because it highlights how important the role of the other is in the constitution of one’s identity. It is through the other’s smile or tears that I know myself and my own expressions: “in short, I know that my anger corresponds to a precise change in my face because I know that they correspond in the other, and not the other way round”.<sup>40</sup>

The empathic relationship and the recognition of the experiences of others is therefore an essential process for the recognition of our own experiences. What we perceive in others is not their individual history or the bonds that make them unique (their relationships, their friends, their parents, etc.), but rather what we have in common, i.e. the emotions we all feel: fear, joy, anxiety or sadness. In this sense, according to this reading of recognition, mimesis is an indispensable concept for understanding the characteristics of the human being.

### 5. *Positive empathy and negative empathy*

In the course of this investigation, it has become clear that empathy enables us to recognise objects by their qualitative aspects. In the analysis of the empathic relationship with other subjects, it emerged that the empathic mechanism works in the same way, but is characterised by a much greater activation power. In addition, in the case of the recognition of other subjects – as with objects, but to an even greater extent – the empathic relationship allows us to become aware of relevant aspects of ourselves. When the empathic act takes place, there is no identification of two actual selves, nor is there a superimposition of one self on the other, but only an *ideal* experience in which I feel the emotions of the other, using my own emotional chords as a means of understanding theirs.

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40 *Ibid.*, p. 699.

In this original and foundational dimension of the empathic relationship,<sup>41</sup> I know nothing about the other person, their affairs, their history and their desires, but our common humanity allows me to grasp the emotional experience expressed in their gesture: that emotion, which is precisely what we have in common, is then activated in me. The encounter with the other also allows me to grasp certain aspects of myself. However, this sort of ‘self-activation’ that makes us feel and understand the world as emotionally connoted – and that concerns everyone, both objects and subjects – is not always only positive. Sometimes the demand that comes from the world does not generate adherence but, on the contrary, rejection.

In general, as said, the instinctive and immediate nature of the empathic relationship should not be understood as a form of reasoning by analogy (in which I make an effort to understand how I would feel if I were in the other’s place), but as something that often happens even unwillingly, or unknowingly. To take the example of the acrobat, I do not try to put myself in the place of the acrobat, on the contrary, by observing him, I instinctively and mechanically imitate his movements inwardly and unconsciously; his experience, which finds expression in his movements, becomes my experience: I feel his fear, dizziness, vertigo and emotion. I empathise with his movements, and the experience that is activated in me by looking at him is projected back onto him; but this is an instinctive activity that I do not engage in by choice: if I am at the circus and I am watching an acrobat, I cannot choose *not* to feel vertigo and dizziness, because the activation is unconscious and immediate.

But let us come to the point of interest here: the duplicity of empathy, its being both positive and negative. To explain this, I will use another Lippsian example, namely what happens when we see a laughing face. When we look at another person laughing, we feel a demand to feel that merriment in ourselves, and we are thus led to “act inwardly”<sup>42</sup> according to that demand. Again, it is a demand that acts on an instinctive and un-

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41 Of course, empathic experience cannot be limited to this instinctive, unconscious activation. Empathy must be thought of as structured in layers. The one in question is the original, foundational layer, in which the imitative dimension plays a fundamental role. This layer is followed by a more cognitive dimension in which the ability to integrate instinctive and immediate reactions with a knowledge of the context and the other’s point of view allows a deeper and more articulate understanding of their condition. On this subject I refer readers to A. Donise, *Critica della ragione empatica. Fenomenologia dell’altruismo e della crudeltà*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2019.

42 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 109.

conscious level.<sup>43</sup> When we look at another person's laughing face, it is instinctive for us to adopt an inner attitude of laughter, even without being fully aware of it.

This is the case of positive empathy, or more generally of empathy *tout court*, since when we speak of empathy we mostly refer to cases where the relationship is fluid and unhindered. But what happens if the laughter appears to me to be somewhat mocking? Or if the other person is arrogant or aggressive?<sup>44</sup> In this case I am unable to freely surrender to the demand coming from the other's face and experience an "obstacle or friction or inner dissonance".<sup>45</sup> The demand is the same, but I cannot smile or feel in harmony with the other. The friction generates displeasure: "the mockingly jubilant face is unpleasant to me and perhaps, deep down, repugnant to me".<sup>46</sup> This is a typical case of *negative empathy*: a feeling for the other to which I cannot spontaneously abandon myself, a feeling that does not give rise to the pleasure that comes from agreement, and which on the contrary gives me an unpleasant sensation.

Indeed, Lipps notes that in general the sensation of agreement in the face of demands from things and others generates pleasure; friction, on the other hand, generates conflict and therefore a feeling of displeasure. In the case of friction, the object's (or the observed subject's) demand acquires a particular meaning, because it becomes a "demand in the sense of a hostile request or of the introduction of something adverse into me",<sup>47</sup> of something that is directed against me.

The negative aspect of empathy should not be underestimated because it also explains the process of separation of the individual, which determines the constitution of individuality. It is the power of the negative, with its generation of friction, annoyance and displeasure, that allows us to distance ourselves from the other, first of all by defining the boundaries of our own self.<sup>48</sup>

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43 *Ibid.* Lipps comments: "nature, wise as she is, has everywhere taken control of what is most important for our existence: she has made it a matter of instinct, thus removing it from our discretion".

44 Th. Lipps, *Ästhetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, vol. I: *Grundlegung der Ästhetik*, cit., p. 139.

45 Th. Lipps, *Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuss*, cit., p. 110.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

48 This is not the place to outline this aspect of negative empathy, even though it is very relevant. I will limit myself to referring, in addition to the aforementioned Lipps, to M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Transaction Publishers, London 2008.

So, empathy cannot be characterised in exclusively positive terms: our immediate relationship with the world can also be one of friction, horror and disgust. However, it must be clear that while empathy is a natural mechanism like instinct, the positivity or negativity that always characterises the empathic relationship is also linked to the cultural context, and therefore can be largely modified by experience and education. This dual connotation of negative empathy is relevant: on the one hand, it is a constitutive feeling of the human being, who will inevitably have unpleasant and ‘disgusting’ experiences in life, but on the other hand, the content of this disgust may partly vary according to the culture or values one grew up with. Although the capacity to feel horror and disgust is thus innate, it is only acquired and materialized over the course of life<sup>49</sup> and through socialisation.

### 6. *Recognition: between knowledge and practice*

Having clarified the characteristics of ‘empathic recognition’, we can try to take an initial stock of the journey so far. The recognition I have outlined in these pages is to be understood primarily as the capacity to grasp the world in its qualitative characteristics. It is a first form of recognition that, while immediately establishing a relationship of acceptance or rejection with the world (linked to pleasure or displeasure), precedes the question of the value or disvalue of what we have in front of us, but – this is what I intend to argue – constitutes its foundation.

Let me first clarify the empathic recognition of objects. I recognise animals, plants, works of art, and I can have an empathic relationship with them, which implies that I also feel and recognise their emotional qualities. Does this recognition necessarily imply a form of respect for these objects? Or, even better, does it imply that in recognising them I also evaluate them as worthy of being appreciated or preserved? Here, too, Lipps’s analysis comes in handy because the judgement with which the subject recognises (*anerkennt*) the object, responding to its claim, has nothing to do with practical action or with the ethical dimension. In fact,

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49 As shown by numerous experiments and the direct experience of anyone dealing with young children, infants do not feel disgust for either insects or excrement until at least the age of two. Although disgust is innate, it is only acquired permanently in the first year of life Cf. Rozin et al. (eds.), *The child’s conception of food: Differentiation of categories of rejected substances in the 16 month to 5 year range*, in “Appetite”, 7, 2, 1986, pp. 141-151.

I can recognise the object's right to be characterised in a certain way, without this implying a positive evaluation, an interest or the need for a given action on my part. Considering an object as a bearer of value (*werthalten*), for example, merely means granting it the legitimacy of being considered as it is, but does not mean that I actually value it or evaluate it positively (*werten*).<sup>50</sup>

However, the same applies to other subjects: does empathising with another person immediately mean recognising them as a bearer of rights and dignity? Or is empathic recognition not sufficient in itself? To answer these questions we must make a distinction. Assuming that the dimension of empathic recognition is an essential part of the process that enables us to know the other, we must distinguish between the moment when we grasp the other with their qualities, finding them pleasant or unpleasant, attractive or disgusting, and the moment when we judge their value, recognising their dignity or not.

The first stage, i. e. the cognitive stage, of recognition, just as every form of sensory perception, is exposed to illusion. Just as a stick immersed in water appears broken to me even though it is not, or just as I might deceive myself about my own desires, so too empathy can lead me into error. Investigating the 'errors' or biases to which empathic recognition is exposed helps to outline some fundamental problems that arise in the transition from recognition as a cognitive relation to the world to recognition as an ethical and political dimension.

### 7. *Empathic errors I: animism or anthropomorphism*

We must therefore ask ourselves whether empathy as a source of knowledge, and therefore as a capacity that enables us to recognise the emotional qualities of the world around us, is reliable. Does empathy give us a true picture of what is in front of us? Unfortunately, empathising with something and recognising it as real does not protect us from error; and, as Lipps explicitly argues, the only condition for talking about "authentic knowledge" and "truth" is a collaboration between the empathic and rational dimensions. Just like sensory perception or inner perception, empathy as a "source of knowledge" requires the scrutiny of reason, which can distinguish and effect the "separation between the

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50 Th. Lipps, *Vom Fühlen, Wollen und Denken. Versuch einer Theorie des Willens*. Zweite, völlig umgearbeitete Auflage, Leipzig 1907, p. 198.



‘apparent’ and the definitive real”. This “scrutiny of reason” mainly concerns our relationship with things. In our relationship with objects we often fall victim to “empathic errors”, which should be understood as errors of recognition: one of these is what we might call the “tendency towards animism”, a conception that views all reality as animate and endowed with intentions.<sup>51</sup> Animism is nothing other than primal empathy uncorrected by reason: “a tree, a rock, a stream are thought of as volitional beings” even though, in fact, these objects “resist” the empathic activity that tends to animate them.<sup>52</sup>

This kind of error is more frequent in childhood, when rationality is not yet sufficiently developed, but it is also the root of most primitive cults. Within this type of error, however, we can include the tendency, found also in adults, to attribute human intentions and desires to animals or even objects. This same mechanism is evidently at work in the unreflective anger towards a malfunctioning household appliance. This kind of error is related to an overconfidence in empathic appearances leading to a recognition that is not sufficiently corrected by the experience and knowledge we have about these objects. In the event that I notice the error, the immediate impression may gradually be reduced to appearance. The correction, however, passes through other empathic acts, which are also subject to the scrutiny of reason. What I want to highlight here is that, for Lipps, we can speak of authentic knowledge only when we reflect on our cognitive and rational capacities that re-work empathic knowledge.

In short, empathy is a valuable source of knowledge, but it can and must be corrected.<sup>53</sup> This correction is enacted by asking ourselves whether what we have felt through an empathic act, which purports to be immediately real, truly is so: is the poodle really happy to be wearing shoes or earrings? But it is also a question of thinking differently about the concept of reason,

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51 The concept of “intentional stance” proposed more recently by Daniel Dennett points at least partly in this direction. In his perspective, the intentional stance is a “strategy of interpreting the behavior of an entity (person, a animal, artifact, whatever) by treating it as if it were a rational agent who governed its ‘choice’ of ‘action’ by a ‘consideration’ of its ‘beliefs’ and ‘desires’”. Cf. D. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds*, New York, Basic Books 1996, p. 33.

52 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 237.

53 It is important to note that Lipps takes this concept of ‘correction’ from Hume, who, however, did not link it directly to the concept of reason, but to a broader prospective human capacity. Cf. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, reprinted from the Original Edition in three volumes and edited, with an analytical index, by L.A. Selby-Bigge, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1896, p. 582.

because rationality also has empathy at its service, and not just the senses and the intellect. And emotional qualities are an integral part of how we know and recognise the world, as well as of our ability to distinguish true from false and right from wrong.<sup>54</sup>

### 8. *Empathic errors 2: Deanimation or dehumanisation*

At this point in the investigation, it would be very reassuring to be able to claim that the collaboration between the cognitive sphere and the emotional and empathic sphere protects us from further errors of recognition. Unfortunately, however, it is precisely in the cognitive dimension that the second error, specular and symmetrical to the first, creeps in. If as children we are more inclined to attribute human desires and intentions to animals, plants and objects, with time and experience, we learn not to trust what we feel. Phenomenologist Max Scheler said it with crystal clarity: our development passes through the ability to de-animate our surrounding world.<sup>55</sup> We learn to recognise that not everything around us is animated and connoted by anthropomorphic desires and intentions. This development, Lipps claimed, is an advancement of reason, since, as we have seen, “animistic consideration (...) is nothing more than primal empathy uncorrected by thought”.<sup>56</sup> However, in the progressive de-animation in which we learn that objects do not have intentions of their own, there lurks a very dangerous pitfall: in learning from experience not to trust empathic appearances too much, we acquire the mechanism of de-animation. Knowing that a robot does not feel pain encourages us to ensure that “empathic recognition” – which still tends to be activated – does not determine our actions.

The de-animation process comes in different degrees and can become de-anthropomorphisation, pushing us to focus on differences instead of commonalities, for example in the case of our relationship with animals. Once learned, this mechanism knows no bounds and can also affect our relationship with other humans, prompting us to de-humanise the other

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54 From this perspective, the emotional and qualitative dimension of the world, together with everything that comes from the senses, is fully included among the elements that allow the intellect and reason to speak of knowledge. On this subject, I refer the reader to my *Critica della ragione empatica. Fenomenologia dell'altruismo e della crudeltà*, cit..

55 Cf. M. Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, Transaction Publishers, London 2008, p. 239.

56 Th. Lipps, *Erkenntnisquellen. Einfühlung*, cit., p. 237.

precisely based on elements that underline the difference between me and him or her or, better still, between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Humans are very good at dehumanising other humans on the basis of somatic differences, such as gender or skin colour, but not only. When no firm somatic basis for distinction can be found, one introduces the lesser capacity for reasoning,<sup>57</sup> as in the case of slaves in ancient Greece. Indeed, history shows that differences creep into the most varied of things: the other may have different pain thresholds from ours, less capacity for feeling, or, as in the case of Jews, be attributed with a nature inclined to conspiracy and lust for power.

Difference is easily associated with distance: the other’s diversity means that their pain and their dreams, although recognised empathically, are not recognised as a fundamental element of our deliberative process and are thus reduced to “empathic errors”. We therefore become the victims of a sort of over-correction. In this way, the suffering of the other does not affect our actions because it is deemed only apparent, nor is it placed on the same level as our own. Corrections to empathic appearances can therefore be very dangerous if, together with difference, they end up conveying the idea that the other is somehow inferior.

### 9. *Conclusions*

Empathic recognition is an immediate and emotional relationship that directly involves the recognising subject: the emotional chords that are activated are our own, even if the score we are playing is the world around us.

As we have seen, precisely because our ego is an instrument for knowing the world, we are exposed to a double error: animism and dehumanisation. Both of these errors lead to a misrecognition of the other, i.e. they make us incapable of grasping their authentic nature, and the object of recognition is not always in a position to demand the correct recognition of its characteristics. As Fanon noted,<sup>58</sup> even when we speak of a confrontation between subjects, as in the case of the Hegelian “struggle for recognition”, the clash is only possible when two identities are sufficiently developed to

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57 The Greeks considered slavery normal because they did not regard slaves as human beings on a par with themselves. Failing to identify a firm somatic basis for such a distinction, “the surest demarcation of the condition of the slave by nature seems to be the lack of logos, the language-reason”. Cf. M. Vegetti, *Il coltello e lo stilo. Animali, schiavi, barbari donne, alle origini della razionalità scientifica*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1979, p. 131.

58 F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Ed. Seuil, Paris 1952.

produce a conflict (which of course can then give rise to the subordination of the vanquished and the domination of the victor); but in the case of more vulnerable or less structured identities, there is no conflict, but rather the risk of misrecognition.

In the reading proposed so far, misrecognition arises primarily from an error in recognition: the other is either concealed by the identity of the recognising agent, or misrecognised through a “correction” that the latter operates based on previous cognitive (or ideological) elements. In his analyses, rather than underlining the moment of recognition behind the process of subjectification in the black-white relationship, Fanon highlights precisely the moment of misrecognition. In order to be appreciated, a black person must wear white masks, thus misrecognising their own identity, adapting to the agent’s model and forgetting themselves.

Recognition of the other’s qualities is exposed to errors and misunderstandings that open the door to misrecognition. Overcoming misrecognition is an arduous task that involves a significant cognitive effort on the part of the recognising subject: in some cases this process paves the way to conflict, in others to correction exercises that can take a long time. Recognising the world as emotionally connoted – despite being an integral and fundamental part of our knowledge – does not mean that we immediately know its deepest essence, nor does grasping its essence guarantee respect for it or the attribution of dignity to it.

Here, however, a conceptual distinction must be made between processes that require the recognition of the authentic characteristics of the recognised object and processes that require recognising the value of this object as positive (or negative). In the attempt to correct the errors of empathic recognition, conflicts or struggles may take place, collapsing these two moments to the point of making them barely distinguishable: through the struggle, the recognised object tries to impose on the recognising agent the need to correct any cognitive and empathic errors. The correction of these errors may allow the other to be grasped in their diversity, not misunderstanding their characteristics. But, at the same time, through the struggle, the object of recognition demands that its value be recognised. Of course, it is not automatic that the recognition of value takes place.

In other cases, the misrecognition of the other’s qualities can generate exploitation and injustice without the object being able to make any claim, at least in the first person (this is the case with animals, the environment and everything that is not itself capable of recognition, including subjects who have lost this capacity, have not yet acquired it or never will). In these

cases, it is important to distinguish between the empathic and cognitive recognition that recognises the qualities of the 'object' in question and the value that one intends to attribute to this 'object'.

In conclusion, empathic recognition is of fundamental importance as a cognitive instrument of subjectivity, but not as an instrument of ethics. The emotional and evaluative dimension is indeed immediately present in our being in the world, but precisely because it is an instinctive element shaped by habit, we cannot rely on it as the exclusive basis of our judgement. Nevertheless, empathic recognition remains a decisive part of our knowledge and our capacity for deliberation.



# IS EMPATHIC REGULATION A MORAL VIRTUE?

Sarah Songhorian

## *Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and “virtue”. To this aim, I will distinguish two possible forms their relationship may take: empathy can either be conceived (a) as a virtue *per se*; or (b) as an enabling condition for virtues to develop. Pre-theoretically, we are driven to consider (a) as correct, and yet a better understanding of the concept of “empathy” shows that that is not the case. To argue against (a), I will discuss the problematic features of broad definitions of empathy (that make (a) seem trivially true; § 2). Before proposing a narrower definition – that I take to be useful to connect it with virtue (§ 4) –, I will focus more specifically on some of the problems empathy has (§ 3). Finally, I will sketch how empathic regulation, and not empathy by itself can make (b) true.

*Keywords:* Empathy, Virtue, Empathic Regulation, Moral Behavior.

## 1. *Introduction*

Empathy is commonly understood as enabling us to recognize the mental life of others – especially their emotional one –, to understand them, care for them, and to act in their interest (e.g. Slote 2013; Shamay-Tsoory 2011; Baron-Cohen 2011; Rifkin 2009; Preston, de Waal 2002). By recognizing others through the exercise of our empathic abilities, humans are often believed to act in morally acceptable or even virtuous ways. As a folk concept, empathy is identified with caring, helping, or being altruistic; and it is often tested empirically based on the outwards behavior manifesting the latter (Baron-Cohen 2011). Focusing on these features, empathy seems a moral good (against this view, Bloom 2014; 2017): improving it will automatically improve our moral behavior.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Most advocates of this view seem to imply that the term “moral” refers uniquely to other-oriented behaviors and virtues, to actions concerned with others’ well-

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to investigate the exact relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and that of “virtue”. While both concepts have received huge attention within the ethical debate, little has been done to understand how and whether they are connected (Battaly 2011; Slote 2013; Peterson 2017). With this aim in mind, I will first distinguish two possible forms the relationship may take. Empathy can, in fact, either be conceived of *a*) as a virtue *per se*; *b*) or as an enabling condition for virtues to develop (Miller 2009; Deane-Drummond 2017).

As Battaly (2011) correctly points out, pre-theoretically we are to some extent driven to consider *a*) as the correct option, and yet, she continues, a philosophical and psychological better understanding of empathy shows that that is not the case. I will argue that this misunderstanding follows from incorrect, commonsensical, and broad definitions of “empathy” and, more briefly, of “virtue” (§2). In fact, those definitions make *a*) seem trivially true by arguing, for instance, that evil and cruelty are just a lack of empathy and conversely that good is its presence (Baron-Cohen 2011, p. 15; against this view see Donise 2020). And yet, they do not provide necessary or sufficient conditions for something to be an instance of either concept, and, in doing so, they are unable to account for the biases, limitations, and excesses empathy actually or potentially has (Prinz 2011a; 2011b; Oakley 2011; Bloom 2014; Fuchs 2017).

I will then focus more specifically on empathy’s limitations and excesses (§ 3), and I will propose a more restricted definition of empathy (§ 4; modified from De Vignemont and Singer 2006, p. 435) that is – contrary to a broad one – able to account for those limitations, but that makes *a*) false. Under this definition, empathy would prove to be neither necessary nor sufficient for virtue (similarly, Darwall 1998, p. 261).

Rejecting *a*), as I would, however, says nothing about *b*), i.e. whether the ability to empathize can – and sometimes is – an enabling condition to develop other-oriented moral virtues, whichever they are. I will, thus, conclude by arguing in favor of the idea that the ability to regulate empathy (§ 5; cfr. Ray and Gallegos de Castillo 2019) can have exactly this role of making moral virtues like sympathy or compassion possible, in so far as it is a tool for avoid-

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being. I do not share this assumption, although I believe other-oriented behavior constitutes an important and possibly ineliminable part of what being moral amounts to, and the one that is more easily connected to empathy. Pointing at the existence of other domains of what being moral amounts to is certainly a viable way to object to these views, I will not, however, focus extensively on it here as it will not allow showing the internal problems inherent in connecting empathy to morality. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I clarify this.



ing empathy's natural excesses and limitations (Kauppinen 2014). So, as it happens with the ability to regulate one's emotions, *if* the subject is capable of empathy, emphatic regulation has the effect of settling correctness conditions for the emphatic reaction which are necessary in order to allow empathy, thus regulated, to enable the development of moral virtues towards others.

Hence, empathic regulation is *useful* to those subjects that are endowed with typical empathic abilities. Learning to moderate and regulate one's own empathic reactions towards others paves the way for sympathy and compassion. If a subject lacks such abilities – as it is often claimed to be the case of subjects with ASD (Baron-Cohen 2011; against this view, see Smith 2009) or, less controversially, of psychopaths –, then of course her access to moral virtues will not proceed along that path. This, however, does not entail that they cannot have a different access to moral virtue; it simply means that that access is not mediated by empathy or by empathic regulation.

I will, therefore, conclude that neither empathy nor empathic regulation are *per se* virtues, and yet a suitable emphatic regulation (unlike empathy *per se*) can be *useful* as an enabling condition for developing certain moral virtues in interpersonal relationships, given the typical endowment of empathic abilities. In the absence of such endowment, however, one cannot claim that such virtues cannot be reached otherwise – being empathic regulation neither necessary nor sufficient for those virtues to develop.

## 2. Broad definitions of “empathy” and “virtue”

As anticipated, broad and commonsensical understandings of empathy and virtue seem to make it trivially true that the former is a moral virtue. In fact, if one includes in the definition of empathy phenomena going from the automatic and involuntary feeling we have when we see someone in deep distress to the altruistic or helpful behavior we might perform on the basis of that feeling (or of a more complex one), to caring for those in distress, recognizing their interests and making them, to some extent, our own, then empathy seems to be a characteristic than one ought to have, a virtue worth pursuing. Such definitions, however, make empathy a virtue *per se* at a level of explanation that is not philosophically interesting (Battaly 2011: 282). Empathy is too broadly conceived and the same can be said for virtues: in fact, a commonsensical understanding of them is centered on the idea that they «are qualities that make us morally good people» (Battaly 2011: 277ft). To argue for the connection between empathy and virtue I will, thus, account for the former in a narrower way (§ 4).

I have argued elsewhere against a broad definition of empathy (Songhorian 2015), but let me here briefly summarize some of the troubling features such definition has for the case at hand – namely, its connection to virtue. First, as anticipated, conceiving empathy broadly makes it look like a virtue in a trivial and philosophically uninteresting way: understanding empathy as a “moral good” and as “the only force that motivates kindness” and altruism (Bloom 2014; cfr. Bloom 2017), virtue is simply within the scope of the concept. However, such definitions make it hard to grasp the concept’s boundaries and to assess which concrete cases fall under them. Would it be possible to help others out of motives that are not connected to empathy in such a scenario? Could Grace help Frances because she knows she is being watched and because performing helping behavior would enhance her reputation? Or because, without any emotional reaction to Frances’s situation, she just believes there are good moral reasons to do so? The answer is clearly yes, even though broad accounts of empathy seem to have a hard time explaining why it is so. As far as the second example is concerned, a commonsensical understanding of empathy as directly entailing helpful behavior would be at odds with the possibility of the latter depending on no emotional reaction at all. As far as the first example is concerned, believing that empathy is the only force driving us to kind, helpful, and altruistic behavior<sup>2</sup> – or even that the latter are within the conceptual boundaries of the former (Preston, de Wall 2002) – hinders the possibility of actually assessing the motives one has. Behaviors apparently morally appropriate (or even good) can in fact be driven by non-morally relevant, or even evil, motives – e.g. Grace is interested in her reputation. And yet, if an externally helping behavior falls within the definition of empathy, or if it is through this behavior that empathy is inferred, then the distinction between authentic moral behavior and inauthentic or only superficial one cannot be grasped.<sup>3</sup> From the outside, in fact, Grace behavior would appear identical in case she acted for an emotional reaction towards Frances’s situation and for her

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2 “The key idea is that we *all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum* (from high to low). People said to be evil or cruel are simply at one extreme of the empathy spectrum” (Baron-Cohen 2011, p. 15).

3 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the distinction between authentic and superficial altruistic behavior could be a way for advocates of the broad account to solve this issue. What I take to be problematic in such a strategy is accounting for the tools to properly distinguish them. Accounting for non-morally driven helping behavior is extremely difficult if the latter falls within the definition of empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011; Preston, de Wall 2002). To do so, one will need to avoid collapsing helping behavior onto empathy.

reputation. When we think of a virtuous character trait we expect more than simple compliance, we expect that the agent has acted on the basis of the right kind of reasons or considerations, and not just that she has performed an act that look ok from the outside. Someone keen to accepting a strong connection – but not a full identification – between empathy and moral behavior might grant that there are cases in which the latter depends on traits or considerations different from the former, that is to say that the set of good behavior is not completely identical to that of empathy. While, at the same time, believing that, when empathy is truly there, a helpful, kind, or altruistic behavior will follow, and thus that it is worth having an empathic character. And yet, that is debatable as well. We can certainly feel someone else’s pain or joy without doing anything about it: we can for instance postpone helping because we are in a hurry or worried about our own life, even though we feel we should. It is not always because of a lack of empathy that we do not help the homeless on the street (Bloom 2014; Baron-Cohen 2011). If helping or being kind always follow from empathy, then these cases will be impossible. Those that conceive empathy as strongly connected or intertwined with helping behavior have a hard time with these cases.<sup>4</sup> They are similarly troubled by *Schadenfreude* and sadism: enjoying someone else’s pain, in fact, seems to imply recognizing their emotional state. If this recognition is part of what being empathic means, then helping behavior, kindness, and altruism do not always follow from empathy: empathy can also pave the way for rejoicing others’ pain, for immoral behavior (Donise 2020).

The problems I have briefly summarize here should prove sufficient to see the difficulties advocates of empathy being a virtue *per se* should face. If empathy and virtue are defined in extremely vague and broad ways, then several phenomena are hard to account for. Before proposing the definition of empathy I find more suitable to account for these phenomena (§ 4), let me focus more carefully on some other problematic features of empathy (§ 3) that, I will claim, call for an amoral definition of its nature.

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4 A strategy for solving these cases could be distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic empathy. However, by doing so, empathy will lose its characterization as the ability to share and resonate others’ emotions to be uniquely identified, when authentic, with an action tendency, an inclination to help. We could not authentically share, in this framework, the emotions of a novel’s protagonist nor, in real life, we could feel together with others when there is no help to be provided.

### 3. *Empathy's biases, limitations and excesses*

The aim of this paragraph is that of underlying some other problematic features of empathy – regardless of its definition. Elsewhere I have argued that such features make the contribution empathy can provide to moral behavior quite limited as opposed to what is often portrayed in political and social discourse (Songhorian 2019). Here I want to focus on the specific problem they pose to accounting for empathy as a virtue *per se*. The problematic features I will focus on are: (a) empathy has several limitations and biases; (b) an excessive empathic response can lead to pathological altruism (Oakley 2011; Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan and Wilson 2012); (c) even though empathy can be a useful guide to moral behavior, it is neither necessary (ASD) nor sufficient (limitations and biases) for the latter to occur, under any definition.

The literature on empathy has underlined, as far as feature (a) is concerned, that our *natural* tendency to empathize with others is flawed (Prinz 2011a; 2011b; Bloom 2014; Fuchs 2017). To be fair, David Hume and Adam Smith in describing sympathy were already aware of the limitations and flaws it could have: sympathizing with the nearest and dearest is clearly easier than doing so with a stranger and both recognized it as a feature requiring us to somehow step away from sympathy being the *only* relevant ability to behave and judge morally (Hume 1739-1740: III.iii.1.14; Smith 1759: I.i.1.9; I.i.4.9 and II.ii.3.4; I will get back to this in § 5). Again, if one argues for a broad conceptualization of empathy, it is hard to account for this flaw. On these accounts, empathy, sympathy and their connection to morally good and virtuous behavior seem to collapse on the former, thus hindering the possibility to recognize that empathy can drive us in immoral or vicious directions and forgetting that there might be other virtues that are not related to empathy. Empathizing with loved ones is clearly easier and more effective than empathizing with a stranger. We easily recognize and are more prone to help those we care about. If that is so, empathy and pro-social behavior seem less strongly tied: we need some further element – i.e. caring for that person for instance – to be really moved to action. While this is obviously problematic for those theories that understand empathy as a virtue *per se*, its problematic nature is not troublesome only for those theoretical approaches. In fact, one may say that there is nothing necessarily wrong with caring more for loved ones and being more prone to help them as opposed to caring for and helping a stranger. And that, all things being equal, is certainly true: we have special duties deriving from our relationships. However, our ability to empathize is not only improved

when a loved one is concerned: *similarity* and *proximity* modulate the extent to which we can actually share others' emotions, regardless of who they are and what their relationship with the person empathizing is. So, it is not only previous relations, love and care that improve empathy, but also the extent to which someone is similar or close to us. And this can lead us to behave in ways that are not justifiable on the basis of special duties or relations, but that are just based on morally irrelevant factors such as ethnic, national or local identities (the so-called in-group biases). In a nutshell, while it might well be the case that I have justifying reasons to help, care and recognize more the interests of a loved one, doing so with someone *just* on the basis of physical similarity (through my enhanced ability to empathize with that person) will be unjustifiable. Conceiving empathy as a virtue *per se* would, thus, mean believing this kind of bias – that is, the fact that empathy can be improved towards people just because of morally irrelevant similarities with the empathizer – is morally acceptable or even fosters virtuous conduct. To account for this pitfall of empathy, one will need to define it in a narrower way (§ 4) and to disengage it from the idea that it is a virtue (although nothing has yet been said about its possibility of fostering other virtues; cfr. § 5). Similarly to what Hume and Smith proposed, to develop virtues one may need empathy (or sympathy), although it is certainly not sufficient for them to develop. Shortly, I will claim not only for its insufficiency, but also for the fact that it may not be necessary in all given cases (when considering feature (c)).

Another bias empathy shows is its being stronger when focusing on an identifiable individual as opposed to a unidentifiable one (Small, Loewenstein and Slovic 2007). Our donations to charity, just to provide an example of something we identify as a virtuous behavior, are modulated by whether we can identify the victim of a certain condition. Focusing on one individual in distress is more effective – in terms of the amount of money we send to charities – than learning the statistically relevant information about all those in peril. I believe the data showing we are more prone to donate to charities if we identify a victim, when the rational thing to do will be to donate more if we know many are in distress (and not just one person), can be explained again with a bias of our empathic abilities. Obviously, empathy as the ability to pick up and resonate others' emotions is stronger if one can see or imagine an identifiable individual, and that is not problematic *per se* (unless one attributes to empathy the characteristic of being a virtue). What is troublesome is in fact believing it is the only ability playing a role in driving our moral behavior. If that is so, then it will be right and virtuous to help only identifiable victims.

Many more biases could be identified as modulators of empathy – e.g. the emotional state the empathizer is in, the media exposure to certain perils –, but those discussed so far should be sufficient to convince the reader of the problematic features of empathy and of the impossibility to believe it is *per se* a virtue.

The second problematic feature (b) is that it does not seem to be true that the more empathic the better. Being excessively focused or concerned with what others feel can hinder the possibility for the empathizer to recognize her own plans, desires and feelings. This might lead to forms of emotional identification (Scheler 1923) in which the sense of self, rather than being improved and enhanced by the relation with others (Smith 1759), can be lost or strongly hindered. This is what some have defined as pathological altruism (Oakley 2011; Oakley, Knafo, Madhavan and Wilson 2012) and that certainly cannot be conceived of as a moral virtue. Furthermore, if empathy has to do with our ability to understand others in their particularity, in their being different individuals with specific emotional lives, with desires and plans of their own, one cannot but conceive this ability as strongly connected with the possibility for the subject of recognizing her own emotional life, plans and desires. Forgetting that empathy is a relational concept requiring at least two subjects and that the empathizer has a sense – implicit or explicit – of the difference between herself and those with whom she empathizes means equating empathy with emotional identification. Making, thus, the connection with virtue even harder.

If by considering the biases and limits empathy faces (a) one is forced to accept that it is not a sufficient condition for moral behavior and moral virtue, one may be still tempted to conceive it is a necessary one. And yet, if high functioning individuals with ASD actually have little or no empathy (Baron-Cohen 2011 vs. Smith 2009), then either one considers empathy not necessary for someone to be a moral agent or one has to reject that they can be such agents. However, they are certainly able to engage in moral actions even if they might have learned how they should behave in a more cognitive and rule-guided manner as opposed to the way in which typical children do. Therefore, at least in some cases – i.e. ASD – empathy is not necessary for moral behavior. This, however, does not mean that empathy is a useless ability to learn how to behave morally and that no virtues can depend on exercising it. What it does mean is that it is not the only possible path to achieve moral behavior or moral virtue. Some individuals achieve the latter by different means, and even typically developed individuals do not need to always empathize to behave in a

virtuous manner. There is much more than empathy to be a decent moral agent and even more so to be a virtuous one.

The aim of this paragraph was to show some problematic features of empathy that makes it troublesome to conceive it as a moral virtue *per se*. Such features remain problematic for empathy even if one accepts that a too broad definition is misleading and simplistic. Thus, before concluding by analyzing the actual relationship empathy and virtue have – namely the fact that the former can be an enabling condition, neither necessary nor sufficient, to develop some virtues (§ 5) –, let me focus on a definition of empathy that better accommodates its limits and biases and that can serve as a philosophically more interesting notion to connect it to virtue.

#### 4. *Empathy's narrow definition*

As we have seen in § 2, defining empathy in a commonsensical and broad way may easily account for its understanding as a virtue, but it does so at the cost of being philosophically uninteresting and being unable to account for the many cases of empathy's failure. If empathy is a virtue *per se*, how can we account for the occurrences of empathy without a subsequent morally virtuous behavior?

It is for this reason and for the intrinsic limitations of empathy (discussed in § 3) that a narrower definition might better serve the purpose of connecting it to virtue and to account for its role in recognizing others and one own emotional life.

Empathy narrowly construed can be defined as follows:

- (i) one is in an affective state;
- (ii) this state is [to some extent] isomorphic to another person's affective state;
- (iii) this state is elicited by the observation or imagination of another person's affective state (De Vignemont and Singer 2006, p. 435).

Focusing on such a definition of empathy – something along the lines of what some have called immediate empathy (Kauppinen 2014) or affective empathy (e.g. Shamay-Tsoory *et al.* 2009) – means disentangling empathy from other phenomena that are certainly related to it, but are more complex and require the contribution of other abilities. Just to give an example, perspective-taking or cognitive empathy are sometimes conceived of as other aspects of empathy. And yet, to be able to walk a mile in someone else's shoes (a figure of speech that explicate how we can

take the perspective of someone else) implies more than the affective attunement that seems to be crucial in affective empathy. We need to be able to imagine ourselves in the position of the other, to compare how we ourselves would feel with how that person actually felt (often our life plans, desires, hopes and emotions differ from those of others). In a nutshell, we need to be able – as the definition *cognitive* empathy shows – to deploy a bunch of cognitive abilities that are more complex than those an immediate empathic response seems to imply.

Focusing on the narrow definition proposed is useful for various reasons. First, it accounts for many failures of empathy and, more importantly, for its amoral nature. If what counts as empathy is just an affective state A is in because of seeing or imagining B in a similar state, then it is harder to stress its normative or moral significance by itself. At this very stage, *Schadenfreude* and sadism are possible, just as much as it is ok to be more empathic to the near and dear.

What is morally relevant, thus, is how I direct my immediate empathic responses, how I regulate empathy, but it is not at the level of the immediate and often involuntary feeling of sharing the others' emotions that I do that. A different standpoint needs to be added for me to recognize that empathy can lead me astray. I may not be immediately capable – or even at all capable – of changing my emotional reactions to the expressed emotions of others, but I might still know that I should not let them guide my behavior if I aim at being a virtuous individual. The more cognitive capabilities that are somehow conflated in the definition of empathy by a broad definition can here be more easily distinguished by adopting a more restricted definition.

Second, accounting for empathy's biases, limitations, excesses is possible if we restrict its definition and accept that something more than empathy is needed to grant good or virtuous behavior. If we rely uniquely on our immediate emotional ability to share others' feelings, there is – as we have seen in § 3 – no way to distinguish between cases in which being guided by an increased empathy for the near and dear is warranted and cases in which it is not. Furthermore, an excessive concentration on immediate and broad empathy will easily count as virtuous behaviors that are forgetful of the self/other distinction, in which the virtuous thing to do amounts to losing oneself in the pursuit of focusing on others.

Empathy in this minimal sense is thus an ability or a predisposition to attune oneself with others' emotions – by recognizing that the emotions one is mirroring or attuning to are not originated in oneself, that is to say by being aware (implicitly or explicitly) of the self/other distinction. An



ability or predisposition cannot by itself be identified with a virtue. What might be virtuous, instead, is the way we educate and regulate such disposition. If it is true (although highly disputable) that some individuals have a “zero degree of empathy” (Baron-Cohen 2011) to begin with and others are endowed with high levels of empathy, it is contentious that we might view a natural (or primitive) disposition as a virtue *per se*. Traditionally, virtues require a certain effort by the agent possessing them, an exercise to make them second nature. They are hardly conceived of as first nature: doing so would mean accepting an extreme version of the naturalization of ethics and of virtues. Claiming that empathy is a virtue *per se* is tantamount to claiming that our natural and possibly unchangeable tendency to share others’ emotional lives is already a virtue, that no effort or exercise is needed to be good moral agents: we just are or are not (Baron-Cohen 2011). I take this to be an extremely counterintuitive consequence of believing there is a connection between empathy and virtue. It is for this reason that empathy should be better understood in a minimal sense and its relation to virtue should be conceived of as if the former – at best – could be an enabling condition to develop properly moral virtues by means of the subject exercising and regulating its immediate emotional responses.

The aim of this paragraph was to show how a narrower definition of empathy – different from those analyzed by Battaly (2011) – could better serve at accounting both for its limits and excesses and for its connection to virtue. In the following paragraph I will say something more about the positive connection between these two concepts. In fact, if up until now I have shown why one should reject the claim that empathy is *per se* a virtue (in line with Battaly 2011), nothing has been said so far about the possibility that the ability to empathize can – and sometimes is – an enabling condition to develop other-oriented moral virtues. I will deal with this issue in § 5.

### 5. *Empathic regulation as an enabling condition for virtue*

Based on what we have seen so far, and in line with Battaly (2011, p. 287), empathy *per se* cannot be confused with either a moral virtue (such as benevolence or the sympathy of Smith’s [1759] impartial spectator) or with an intellectual virtue (such as open-mindedness). Empathy is an *involuntary* and *automatic* ability and «no capacities are themselves virtues» (Battaly 2011, p. 287). Empathy is *amoral* (as mentioned, it is compatible with *Schadenfreude* and sadism):

Empathy can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism. It all depends on why one is interested in the other's perspective. Sympathy, on the other hand, is felt as from the perspective of "one-caring." (Darwall 1998, p. 261).

Interestingly, Darwall introduces in this quotation a distinction between empathy – as an amoral ability – and sympathy possibly a morally connotated phenomenon, in which the perspective taken is incompatible with immoral or amoral outcomes. To be sympathetic one necessarily has to care for the other (again, as distinct from oneself).

As anticipated, classical sentimentalists like David Hume and Adam Smith were well aware of the kind of biases and limitations empathy shows and thought that they could be overcome by elaborating it in a more detached and impartial manner, by regulating empathy from an ideal or general standpoint (Hume 1739-1740: III.iii.1.14; Smith 1759: I.i.1.9; I.i.4.9 and II.ii.3.4).<sup>5</sup> Sympathy, thus, implies a regulated version of empathy in which other information or dispositions are relevant as well. Ideally regulating empathy means reflectively and over time learning to distance oneself from the situations and improving our emotional response when it is unjustifiably lacking and reducing it when it is excessive. The cognitive abilities briefly mentioned in § 4 – e.g. perspective-taking and cognitive empathy – will, in this account, be a constitutive part of what being sympathetic means, although they do not need to be actively present each and every time we behave.<sup>6</sup> I cannot be interested in the well-being of another if I am unable to put myself into that person's shoes and to consider her situation both impersonating her and projecting myself into it (what Kauppinen has called respectively other-focused or self-focused cognitive empathy;

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5 As the reader may know, Hume and Smith never use the term "empathy", on the contrary they refer uniquely to "sympathy". This, however, is not sufficient to claim that the concept of empathy was absent from their thought, since the term "empathy" did not enter the English vocabulary before Titchener (1909a; 1909b) coined it to translate the German term "einfühlung" as distinct from "mitgefühl", which is usually translated as "sympathy" (Escalas, Stern 2003, p. 567; see also Stueber 2017).

6 Smith already noted that, from exercising over time proper sympathy, general rules emerge (Smith 1759: III.iv.7-8) and we conform to such rules without the need to activate each and every time the complex machinery required to empathize and to position ourselves just at the right distance. Thus, ideally regulating empathy is a general capacity to be developed rather than an occurrent state. We learn to ideally regulate empathy, but we do not need to engage in a reflective and effortful cognitive process to behave virtuously every time. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I clarify this point.

Kauppinen 2014). But that goes beyond emotional or immediate empathy – a relative mirroring of the emotions of others we often experience by passing by a stranger in such a quick manner that it is unthinkable that one needs to imaginatively change one’s place with the other to *feel* that.

The immediacy of empathy, again, is a further argument against its direct connection to virtue. Even without moving too far from a commonsensical understanding of virtue, it is hard to think of something as an instance of a virtue if the subject has no control, responsibility, or awareness of having a specific characteristic or of performing upon it.

And yet, empathy can well be one route to acquire virtues such as sympathy and benevolence; it can be an enabling condition for those virtues to emerge. *Empathic regulation* – as opposed to empathy *per se* – seems a concept that would more easily relate to virtue (Ray and Gallegos de Castillo 2019) since it allows avoiding the excesses typical of empathy and moving towards more aware and pondered ways of sharing with others. As briefly mentioned, regulating empathy from a more detached or impartial standpoint is precisely what Hume and Smith will call sympathy (in its more complete form, the one relevant for morality). If empathy is pondered and regulated – that is to say if the subject learns to regulate her own emotional reactions when facing others’ emotions (without excesses or biases), if she has the *correct* empathic reactions (Kauppinen 2014) –, then she would more easily move towards a virtuous *habitus* (sympathy). This, however, is still not enough for claiming that empathic regulation is always either *necessary* or *sufficient* to the acquisition of moral virtues (think about ASD subjects). What can be said, at this stage, is that, *if* the subject has typical empathic abilities, then it would be useful for her to learn how to regulate them so as to develop some moral virtues. As it happens with the ability to regulate one’s emotions, *if* the subject is capable of empathy, empathic regulation has the effect of settling correctness conditions for the empathic reaction which are necessary in order to allow empathy, thus regulated, to foster the development of moral virtues towards others. Such an enabling condition might also be the easiest way to acquire those virtue, granted it is not the only one possible. To clarify this point, sharing others’ emotions and realizing that we should regulate empathy – just as much as we learn to regulate all emotions – is likely how the majority of typically developed individuals get to be concerned and interested in being morally decent – if not virtuous individuals. As Smith claims, we become soon aware that the gaze we direct towards others is identical to the one the direct at us and are, thus, interested in being recognized by others just as much as we recognize them (the first instances of emotional regulation depend on what we expect

others to deem appropriate). However typical or likely, it is still possible to acquire virtues without empathy. If a subject lacks empathy – as it is often claimed to be the case of subjects with ASD (Baron-Cohen 2011; against this view, see Smith 2009) or, less controversially, of psychopaths –, then of course her access to moral virtues (if any) will not proceed along that path. This, however, does not entail that they cannot have a different access to moral virtue; it simply means that that access is not mediated by empathy or by empathic regulation. Furthermore, claiming that empathy is an enabling condition for some moral virtues does not imply that all virtues depend on empathy's regulation.

Learning to moderate and regulate one's own empathic reactions towards others paves the way for sympathy and compassion – it is the kind of exercise needed to develop a virtuous second nature.

So, if neither empathy *per se* nor empathic regulation can be conceived of as virtues themselves, the latter can certainly – in most cases – be a proxy to develop some other-oriented moral virtues, it can be an enabling condition for them to be acquired.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to investigate the exact relationship between the concepts of “empathy” and that of “virtue”. While both concepts have received huge attention within the ethical debate, little has been done to understand how and whether they are connected (Bataly 2011; Slote 2013; Peterson 2017). With this aim in mind, I have distinguished two possible forms the relationship may take. Empathy can, in fact, either be conceived of *a)* as a virtue *per se*; *b)* or as an enabling condition for virtues to develop (Miller 2009; Deane-Drummond 2017). Having rejected *a)*, I focused on how empathic regulation can be conceived of as a proxy to the development of other-oriented moral virtues. Other-oriented moral virtues require more than immediate empathy: they demand us not only to pre-reflectively knowing about the self-other distinction, but to recognize it and deploy all the cognitive tools we have available to avoid unjustified forms of partiality – towards oneself or the near and dear. Empathy can, thus, develop into benevolence, compassion and sympathy only if we are capable of exercising a regulatory function: up-regulating empathy towards distant and different others and down-regulating it towards our loved ones (Kauppinen 2014; 2017).

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# RECOGNIZING MYSELF IN MY EXPRESSIVE BODY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNT

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## *Abstract*

In this paper I would like to investigate the possibility of one's recognition of oneself in his/her lived body. Specifically, I will maintain the thesis that one can recognize him/herself *as a person* in his/her bodily expressive behaviour. In order to do so, I will give an account of the latter that, even recognizing the pre-reflective nature of bodily expressions, tries to highlight their belonging to the *personal* sphere of our life as embodied beings. At the basis of such an account, the idea of an individual bodily expressive style as a counterpart of one's whole personal style will be developed.

*Keywords:* Bodily expressive style, Personhood, Recognition, Motivational laws.

## *Introduction*

In the framework of the contemporary debate on embodied cognition (O'Regan and Noë 2001; Wilson 2002; Zahavi 2002, 2014; Gallagher 2005, 2017; Clark 2008; Heinamaa 2011; Colombetti 2014), in this paper I would like to investigate the possibility of one's recognition of oneself in his/her lived, and specifically expressive, body.

From a phenomenological perspective, which is the one I would like to assume here, it is generally underlined that one's access to his/her body is a peculiar one. My body is experienced by me from a first-person perspective as a lived body (*Leib*) and not as a mere object (*Körper*) (Husserl 1952, Merleau-Ponty 1945). A specific aspect of such an experience is that I experience my own body partly by means of outer perception (as in the case of the perception of other spatio-temporal objects), partly by means of proprioception. Indeed, outer perception does not suffice to account for the way in which we experience our own body. Stein (1917), for instance, notes that, if it were given solely in acts of outer perception, our body would appear as the strangest object. It would be experienced as a material

thing whose appearances would exhibit weird gaps. It would constantly withhold some of its parts, such as its back, showing us possible courses of perception to make such hidden profiles present, but then hiding them inevitably to us (Stein 1917, pp. 38-39). However, far from being experienced just this way, my body can be experienced by me proprioceptively, “from within” so to say. Lived this way, my body, differently from other physical objects, can never completely vanish for me: it is always there, with a tangible nearness that no other object has. As Stein herself continues, also if we shut our eyes and stretch out our arms so that no limb can touch any other, we cannot really get rid of our body (Stein 1917, p. 39). My body is always there, it belongs to me and I discover that I can feel it proprioceptively even when I have no outer perception of it. Proprioceptively I can have a sense of my body as my own lived body (*Leib*), which I cannot have of any other object or foreign body. In this sense, I have a specific first-person perspective on my own body. Such an experience allows me to perceive my body not actually as something that *I have*, but as something that *I am* (Zahavi 2002, p. 19).<sup>1</sup>

Such a double access I can have to my body, i.e. a proprioceptive one and an outer-perceptual one, is so that proprioception and outer perception do not necessarily convey the same information to me. Indeed, it is a very common experience that I am not proprioceptively aware of the way in which my body looks like from the outside. Interestingly for my purposes here, this is what often happens with bodily expressions in our everyday life. Indeed, bodily expressions are often performed pre-reflectively, in the sense that they are not consciously reflected upon and are unthematic, so that they are not the intentional focus of our experiences and they rather stand in the background of our attention. Moreover, they are usually experienced by the subject proprioceptively and not by means of outer perception, so that when one has the opportunity to look at his/her bodily expressions from the outside, s/he might discover something unexpected and even sometimes find it difficult to attribute that expressive behavior to him/herself. Indeed, bodily expressions are perceptually accessible better to others than to ourselves, exactly because what proprioception conveys of our bodily behavior is often not the same as what outer perception can convey.

This opens a philosophically tricky question about recognition of oneself in one’s expressive behavior: since, as mentioned, my bodily expressions are not completely transparent to me – because of the dual (percep-

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1 Similarly, Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 98-147.

tual and proprioceptive) nature of my experience of my body – and since they are often performed pre-reflectively, can I actually recognize *myself* in my bodily expressions? If yes, which *aspects of myself* can I recognize in my bodily behavior?

In this paper I would like to maintain the thesis that I can actually recognize myself in my bodily expressive behavior and, more specifically, that I can recognize some aspects of the *person* I am. In order to do so, I will give an account of expressive bodily behavior that, even recognizing the pre-reflective nature of bodily expressions, tries to highlight their belonging to the *personal* sphere of our life as embodied beings. This will allow me to maintain that one can recognize some personal traits of him/herself in his/her bodily expressions: this does not mean that this is always the case but at least that it can be so sometimes.

The paper will be organized as follows. In Section 1, I will specify what a person is in my account, which is crucial for me to properly defend the idea that sometimes one can recognize oneself as a *person* in one's expressive behavior. In Section 2, I will present some phenomenological traits of the lived expressive body, highlighting how the latter is not just the *locus* of psychophysical causal connections but also of motivational relations. This will be a crucial prerequisite to defend the thesis that one can recognize some personal traits in one's expressive behavior. I will specifically argue for this thesis in Section 3, where I will present my account of bodily expressivity as the *stylistic mark* of one's personal embodied life.

### 1. *An account of personhood*<sup>2</sup>

In my account, I will define a person as the specific “style of his/her experiences” (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV) or, in other terms, as a motivated connection of *acts* that lets an individuality emerge (Scheler 1916, De Monticelli 2009). Let me clarify this idea.

Against a phenomenological background, I maintain that a person is not just endowed with some psychological *functions*, but rather that he/she can exercise such functions in his/her *acts*. For instance, if “seeing” is a function, “looking at something” is an act. Indeed, as De Monticelli (2009) for instance specifies, in looking at something I exercise an ability of mine (i.e. seeing) to focus my attention on something in my visual field. Something strikes me, it somehow “requires” my attention and I look at it. This basic kind of act

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2 Some contents from sections 1 and 3 have been previously published in Forlè 2019.

already requires a *subject* who performs them: “looking at” is not something that passively happens to me, but something *I* do and that also shows what kind of visual things strike me and draw my attention. Indeed, it is likely, for instance, that, being confronted with the same visual things, you and I will be struck by different details and we will look at the same visual scene in different ways, focusing on different aspects. Even if we are endowed (arguably) with the same psychological function (e.g. sight), it is likely that we will focus our attention variously and we will perceive different aspects of the same scene. In this sense, in our act of *looking at*, a personal trait is already present and is able to emerge (De Monticelli 2009, p. 218).

Similarly, our emotions and feelings are the affective acts in which we respond to those valences of the world that strike us: I may be terribly *scared* by a snake, you may be *amused* by the way it moves on the ground, our friend Paul can look at it with a *deep scientific interest*. We are not just reacting impersonally to something: rather, each of us responds differently to it, and our way of responding is already distinctive of each of us, of our preferences, our interests, our evaluations. This does not necessarily mean that there is no objective reality, but just that different aspects of the same things can strike each individual person differently. In our *responses* to the world, our personal style of being already starts to be constituted. In this sense, we can describe our acts exactly as those lived experiences of ours in which we *take a position* towards the different aspects of reality (Husserl 1952, Scheler 1916). As mentioned, these position-takings are not something that happen to us, but something that requires a subject to make them.

Obviously, my acts are not just basic ones such as perceptions and emotions. I can perform, for instance, another kind of act when I take a position on one of my acts – e.g. when I indulge in my fear of snakes or when I try to suppress it. In this way, I can modify the way in which a basic act such as an emotion *motivates* other acts of mine (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 198-199): if I indulge my fear, the latter may motivate me to run away, whereas if I manage to suppress it, it will probably lose that motivational power.

Another crucial class of acts is obviously the one in which we take positions freely and consciously about how to act and what to do in the world. According to De Monticelli, these types of acts are actual *commitments* we make on our future behavior, both with respect to ourselves (*decisions*) and with respect to others (*promises*) (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 200-201). These acts are those in which my ability to take a position about others, the world, and myself emerges in the clearest and highest way: I can *endorse* my compassion to poor people so that I can be motivated to help them and therefore *decide* (i.e. take a position on how to act) to make a donation.

Our everyday life is characterized by many different acts that are related to one another by *motivational* connections. As we have just seen in the examples provided above, indeed, some acts can motivate others, i.e. they can *give reasons* for other acts. In such a motivational connection of different kinds of acts, I constitute myself as that specific subject who is the author of these position-takings. The idea, however, is not that I am something existing *before and independently* from the acts I make. On the contrary, as Scheler specifies, I come to constitute myself as the individual I am exactly *in* the acts I make: in the positions I take, as well as in the motivations I endorse, my personal identity starts to be shaped as an individuality that will be always different from that of all others (Scheler 1916, pp. 747-751). In fact, as De Monticelli stresses, my acts are not events that happen to me and *cause* other acts to happen, as if the latter were mere *effects*, which are always the same, *ceteris paribus*, if the causes are the same. On the contrary, first, my acts are position-takings that already show my own personal responses to the world; second, several acts of mine are often motives for other acts to be made and I can choose to endorse them and be motivated by them or not. As the subject of these acts, I am involved in them as the *specific individual* I am: another individual, indeed, may not be motivated by his/her acts in the same way as I am (De Monticelli 2009, pp. 219-220).

In this sense, therefore, my personal identity is shaped in my acts as an *individuality*. Moreover, as already mentioned, it is not something that pre-exists my acts, nor something that should be stable and invariant notwithstanding the variety of the acts I make. Rather, my personal identity is exactly what continuously emerges as shaped in my acts and as a kind of “qualitative orientation” (Scheler 1916, p. 751) of these acts. In this sense, we can say that a person is the “style of his/her experiences” (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV): a person emerges in his/her own individual, qualitative, and stylistic way of orienting and directing his/her position-takings, i.e. his/her acts. A person emerges in the specific motivated connection of acts that he/she performs: being motivated in a precise and specific way depending on the position-takings made, such a connection of acts displays a *stylistic mark* that is specific for each different person. This stylistic mark is what unifies all the acts of a person, and which allows one to recognize that individual as the person he/she is.<sup>3</sup>

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3 On Scheler’s phenomenology and specifically on his notion of person, see Amori 2010, Cusinato 2007, Zahavi 2010, Vendrell Ferran 2008.

## 2. *The lived body: bodily expressions and motivational connections*

In section 1, I have described personhood as the domain of motivational connections of acts, so that motivation emerges as the relation connecting specifically *personal* experiences (Stein 1922, p. 34). However, when it comes to the lived body, how do we need to understand the laws governing this sphere of our subjective life? Can we say that in this domain motivational connections are in place or not? As mentioned in the Introduction, I maintain that from a phenomenological perspective we can recognize that the lived expressive body is not just the *locus* of physical and psychophysical causal connections but also of motivational ones. This will be a crucial prerequisite to defend the thesis that one can recognize some personal traits in one's expressive behavior: indeed, only if the sphere of the lived body is governed, at least partly, by the laws of the personal domain – i.e. motivational laws – then some traits of the person I am can be recognized in the sphere of the lived body itself.

We should certainly recognize that, as an object, our body is subject to the laws of nature and generally, we could say, to *causal laws*. Phenomenologists such as Husserl (1952) or Stein (1922) are explicit on this point. Husserl (1952), for instance, admits that if we look at human beings from the perspective of natural sciences, i.e. in the *naturalistic attitude* (pp. 183-194), we will describe them as psycho-physical beings and will find that they are submitted to the laws of causality. Just to mention an example, when considering the constitution of perceptual objects, Husserl stresses that our perceptual experiences are governed by *if-then* relations: *if* I move this way, *then* this aspect of the object will become visually accessible, *if* I look at the object from this particular point of view, *then* the object will look *so and so*, and so on (Husserl 1952, pp. 62-63). Husserl maintains that such *if-then* relations affect perception in a *causal* way. There is a specific spatial relation between my body as an object and the thing I am perceiving, so that if my body moves *so and so*, my retina will be stimulated *so and so*, and this will cause visual images to change in a specific way. I am subject to such physical and psychophysical causal laws, so that the correspondent physical and psychophysical modifications just happen to me, without me to be involved in any active way (Stein 1922, pp. 12-13).

However, both Husserl and Stein maintain that we are not just psycho-physical beings who are subject to causal psychophysical laws.<sup>4</sup> Husserl, for instance, maintains that the naturalistic attitude is too narrow to prop-

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4 Similarly, Merleau-Ponty 1945, pp. 73-89.

erly understand human beings and their experiences; rather, the attitude we should adopt is the *personalistic* one. From this perspective, human beings will appear as persons, not just as psychophysical beings, and they will be recognizable as subject to motivational laws, not just to causal ones (Husserl 1952, pp. 183-194). Stein (1917) presents an example to distinguish between causal connections and motivational ones in human beings that is particularly interesting for our purposes. She considers the phenomenon of bodily expressions of feelings and distinguishes between proper expressions and mere physical accompaniment of feelings. According to Stein, some examples of the latter are: one's heart stopping beating for joy, one's pulse racing in alarm, one's wincing in pain. Such phenomena are understandable in terms of psychophysical causality, where some psychic experiences have causal effects on body functions. The idea is that in these cases the bodily modifications happening to the subjects do not depend on the meaning of the experiences but just on the way the body reacts in specific situations. Similar cases are the ones of causal dependences between vitality states and specific bodily states, as, for instance, in the case of tiredness causing an headache or diminished eyesight (Stein 1922, pp. 18-22).

According to Stein, the case of feelings and proper bodily expressions is completely different. This is so because feelings are essentially connected to expressions: it is the nature of feelings that prescribes them to "unload" in some form of expression.

The relationship of feeling to expression is completely different from that of feeling to the appearance of physical accompaniment. In the former case, I do not notice physical experiences issuing out of the psychic ones, much less their mere simultaneity. Rather, as I live through the feeling, I feel it terminate in an expression or release expression out of itself. Feeling in its pure essence is not something complete in itself. As it were, it is loaded with an energy which must be unloaded (Stein 1917, p. 48)

This idea – particularly, the fact that a feeling "is not something complete in itself" – finds phenomenological evidence in the fact that some bodily expressions seem to be so structurally and functionally significant for the affective states they express that the latter can be significantly altered if the former are not in place (Krueger and Overgaard 2012, pp. 250-254). Let us think, for instance, of the way an affective state of frustration can develop and change depending on whether it unloads in a liberating bodily comportment or not.<sup>5</sup>

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5 On a similar point, see Scheler 1923, p. 251.

However, Stein is perfectly aware that sometimes feelings do not unload themselves in overt behavior, as in the case of repressed bodily expressions. This is not an issue in Stein's account though, since bodily expressions are not the only form of expression in which a feeling can unload itself. Feelings, in their essence, are loaded with an energy that must be unloaded. However, this unloading can be accomplished in many different ways: bodily expressions but also volitions, actions, secret desires, acts of fancy, acts of reflections, and so on. Some of these acts may not present forms of exteriorization but, according to Stein, they are still forms of unloading of feelings. Moreover, a feeling can terminate in a "passionate expression" or in "cool reflection": the type of expression does not say anything about the intensity of the feeling expressed. The various types of expression are various essential possibilities of the unloading of feelings (Stein 1917, p. 49).

Being *essentially* connected, feeling and expression are related by nature and meaning: in this sense, they are connected by motivational laws, not causal ones. Indeed, differently from causal relationships, motivational connections are intelligible or meaningful relations, that is connections where we can "experience the transition from one part to another within an experiential whole" (Stein 1917, p. 78). In other terms, motivational connections are those in which the component experiences have an "experienceable connection" (*ibid.*).

Some examples of proper expressions of feelings that Stein mentions are: blushing for shame, irately clenching fists, angrily furrowing brows, groaning with pain, being jubilant with joy (Stein 1917, p. 48). The idea, therefore, is that in these cases the connection between the feeling and the expression is motivated by the specific meaning of the feeling, so that one can understand, in the experience itself, the reasonable connection between the two. In other terms, the meaning of the feeling *gives reasons for* – i.e. *motivates* – the specific expression displayed. Moreover, since they are motivated – not simply caused – bodily expressions do not just happen to us but they can be, at least to some degree, more or less endorsed by us: in this sense, it may happen that a specific feeling motivates such and such expressions in me but not in you or in another individual.

On the basis of this account of expressivity, we can admit that those motivational laws that govern the proper personal sphere of human beings can operate also at the level of the lived body. This is crucial if one wants to argue for the thesis that one can recognize himself/herself *as a person* in his/her expressive lived body: as previously mentioned, to defend such a thesis the lived body cannot be considered to be governed just by non-per-



sonal, psychophysical causal laws but it needs to be possibly the *locus* of personal – and therefore motivational – connections.

This prerequisite, however, does not seem to be enough to properly defend the mentioned thesis. Something more needs to be said about how one can recognize the person one is in his/her expressive body. Indeed, what is needed is a specification of what bodily expressivity amounts to, which is what I will turn to now.

### 3. *Bodily expressive style*

The thesis I will argue for in what follows is that one can recognize oneself as a person in his/her bodily expressive behavior because, through his/her lived body, each one can express a unique *style of behaving*, meant as a unifying quality of one's bodily comportment that appears as connecting in a motivated and coherent way the different expressions and the various actions of a person. Let me clarify this idea.

First, it is worth underlining that our lived body does not seem to simply express emotions and feelings, but also our specific way of living them. Indeed, through my lived body, I am able to express not just a feeling of shame, for instance, but the specific way in which *I* express shame. In my expression of shame, a *stylistic mark* can emerge: I have a specific way of expressing this feeling and my bodily behavior seems to be able to convey that specific trait. Several cases in our everyday life show that this is the case, as in those situations in which, in the acts, movements and expressions of the other, we are able to grasp not an impersonal and unspecified way of acting, but the specific expressive style of that person. Moreover, a person can be recognized as the *same* in different situations thanks also to such a general style of behavior that pervades his/her actions as a unifying trait. In this respect, for instance, Cusinato (2018) identifies three different levels of constitution of one's own way of expressivity. The most basic one is the impersonal level of expressions as a *minimal common vocabulary*, which seems to be shared by all human beings, independently of the culture or society they live in. The expressions of basic emotions identified by Ekman (1999), for instance, can account for this basic level: emotions such as fear, disgust or joy seem to be universally conveyed by specific facial expressions, which constitute the basic general schemes on which each culture or society shapes its own forms of expressivity. The second level is actually the one defined by societies and cultures: each of them has its specific forms of expressivity of emotions and feelings – so that, for instance,

the way a Japanese smiles to express happiness is different from the way a German does it, even though there are some basic traits that the two have in common. Stemming from the social standards of expressivity of this second level, each individual constitutes his/her own way of expressing his/her affective states. At this level, the individual stylistic mark of each one emerges, so that, even between two homozygous siblings who have grown up in the same family, we can recognize two different styles of expression (Cusinato 2018, pp. 126-128).

However, when talking about the expressive dimension of one's own lived body, I do not mean just one's ability to express feelings and emotions, but also the ability to express more general attitudes and personal traits. Indeed, for instance, actions themselves are not simply accomplished or not, but they can be performed in a more *calm* or *anxious* way, in a more *friendly* or *hostile*, *gentle* or *harsh* manner. By means of these features, we can grasp some traits of the personality of an individual. More interestingly, by the specific way in which each individual *enacts* such expressive traits and by the way in which the latter are structured *gestaltically* in the behavioral style of each one, we can even grasp the specific expressive mark of that individual as opposed to, or as different from, that of another. I can recognize my friend Sarah in her style of behavior, not just on the basis of *what* she does, but also based on *how* she does what she does – that is, based both on the expressive traits of her actions and on the individualized way in which she enacts those expressive traits. The expressive dimension of one's body (the *how* of his/her acting) connotes in a specific way what he/she does (the *what* of his/her acting) and contributes to the emergence of more fine-grained and individualized traits of personality. Indeed, even though our actions and action potentialities already display some aspects of the persons we are, the specific (expressive) way in which we perform these actions characterizes them better and allows the emergence of a more defined personal style.

Let me clarify this point by means of an example by Husserl. Dealing with the notion of personal types, Husserl gives the following example. If I see a man grasping a glass of water, I can understand that he is doing so because he is thirsty and wants to drink. This action does not tell me anything about the personal traits of that man. But if I see that, before drinking, he suddenly lowers the glass since he has noticed a poor thirsty and hungry child in front of him, then this action *can* tell me something about the personality of that man (Husserl 1952, p. 282). Enlarging Husserl's example, we can say that seeing whether the man is lowering the glass with hesitancy, with an attention-seeking behavior, or with compassion can let

us grasp even more about him. Furthermore, if I happen to notice a particular stylistic trait in the expressive way in which that man accomplishes that action, I may recognize not just a man with such and such personality traits, but specifically my friend Paul, as different from my colleague John or my brother Al.

The expressive dimension of our lived body, therefore, seems to be able to convey specifically the *stylistic mark* of our embodied life. Indeed, as seen, it is not just the case that through the lived body we can express something about what our attitudes are in one or another situation. More interestingly, it is also the case that we can convey our specific *style* too. The idea is that an individual style of expression and behavior emerges when a *coherent* and *reasonable* sequence of actions and expressions emerges. An individual style is perceived (proprioceptively or by means of outer perception) when a sort of *unifying quality of behaving* is perceived as connecting in a motivated and coherent way the different expressions and the various actions of a person. The embodied expressive style of each person, therefore, appears to be something that emerges in time through the unfolding of the expressive behavior itself. Rather than being something *prior* to actions and expressions, the individual behavioral style is constituted, on the contrary, as an emergent quality of actions and expressions themselves.

Now, my thesis is that this bodily stylistic mark is what specifically allows an individual to recognize him/herself *as a person* in his/her lived body. It should be easy to see why now, based also on the previous description I gave of what a person is in my framework.

As said in the first section, in my account a person is the “style of his/her experiences” (Guccinelli 2013, p. XCV): a person emerges in his/her own individual, qualitative, and stylistic way of orienting and directing his/her position-takings, that is in the specific motivated connection of acts that he/she performs. Such a connection of acts displays a *stylistic mark* that is specific for each different person and that unifies all the acts of a person.

Now, if one’s lived body can convey an individual style of behavior that emerges as a unifying qualitative feature of one’s expressions and actions, as I have argued for in this section, and if a person can be understood as the individual style of his/her experiences, then my bodily expressive style can be seen as the bodily counterpart of the whole person I am. Indeed, since we are embodied persons (i.e. persons endowed with a lived body), several acts of ours are performed through our body and are often *expressed* by it. Therefore, the way our acts *motivate* each other is also expressed in our body and becomes visible to others. For instance, the fact that I have endorsed my fear of snakes so that it motivates me to scream loudly and

run away as fast as I can shows a motivational connection of acts that is expressed through my lived body, my actions and my expressions.

Surely, this is possible if one accepts the idea that the lived body is not just the *locus* of causal psychophysical laws, but also of motivational, personal ones – as I have maintained in Section 2. A person emerges in the motivated connections of the acts he/she performs. Since it is not governed only by causal laws, the lived body can express such a personal style of motivational connections emerging from one's acts and can display a *coherent* and *reasonable* sequence of actions and expressions, where the latter are perceived as *being motivated* by one's experiences and *motivating* other actions and expressions in a very specific and individualized way.

My thesis is that, because of the mentioned counterpart-relation between my whole personal style and my bodily expressive style, I can be able to recognize at least some aspects of the person I am in my lived body. Obviously, not every act – nor motivated connection of acts – is bodily expressed: this is the reason why not every aspect of the persons we are is shown, and is therefore recognizable, in the body. The person is not completely displayed in his/her lived body: however, some personal stylistic traits are, since the lived (expressive) body can show, partly, that personal stylistic mark that each person has.

The idea, therefore, is that, in our expressive lived body, we can recognize ourselves as the embodied persons we are. Experiencing the expressive traits of my lived body, I can structure my own personal identity and I can recognize myself as a person in the way I express myself. I can recognize who I am, for instance, in the gentle and kind way in which I treat another, or in that particular clumsy behavior I have in situations I am not used to.

However, in conclusion, we should also admit that sometimes, in my bodily expressive style, I may also fail to recognize myself as the person I am. For instance, I may not recognize myself in that unpleasant attitude I once took towards a friend, or in that irritable behavior at home. The possibility of this failure of recognition means that I am not completely transparent to myself, so that it is not necessarily the case that the way I experience my personality traits is epistemologically more reliable than, for instance, the way in which others can perceive me. On the contrary, I can learn a lot about myself and my expressive lived body from what others tell me about my behavior. This is so because, as said in the Introduction, bodily expressions are often performed at a pre-reflective level and the way they are experienced in proprioception is not necessarily the same in which they are experienced in outer perception. However,

this does not necessarily mean that bodily expressions do not pertain to the personal sphere of our life: this is possible, of course, if we admit that a person is not reducible, for instance, to the upshot of narrative and reflective practices in which one constructs and understands his/her own biographical story, but is constituted also in a more pre-reflective way, through the specific embodied style of his/her acts and his/her experience of them. If so, one can, at least partly, recognize oneself as a person in his/her bodily expressive style.

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# TOLERANCE AS RECOGNITION: PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Andrea Staiti

## *Abstract*

In this paper I argue that tolerance is a form of recognition. In the first section I address Rainer Forst's respect-conception of tolerance. In the second section I highlight some problems with Forst's conception, primarily his distinction between ethics and morality. I argue that Forst's view presents two shortcomings: (1) an abstract characterization of the subject involved in acts of tolerance as split between an ethical and a moral self; (2) an unquestioned adherence to the idea that tolerance requires two components, a negative and a positive stance. In the third section I criticize the two-component view of tolerance and articulate a phenomenological alternative based on a broadly realistic conception of value. On this account, tolerance is based on an act of neutralized valuing in the context of empathy. In the last section I elaborate on this account and argue that tolerance amounts to the recognition of the other's capacity to achieve autonomous moral insight. We tolerate others because we want them to correct their wrong moral convictions by themselves, knowing that self-correction is superior to external imposition.

*Keywords:* Tolerance, Phenomenology, Recognition, Value, Respect.

In one of the most famous maxims on the subject, Goethe writes about tolerance: "Tolerance should be a temporary attitude only: it must lead to recognition. To tolerate means to insult." (Goethe 2017, p. 30; translation modified). Despite its brevity, Goethe's maxim encapsulates several issues that still inform the debate on tolerance in the present. As the second sentence of the maxim concisely puts the point, tolerance seems to involve an insulting asymmetry between a tolerator and a tolerated. Unlike, say, respect which is taken to be a fundamentally symmetrical moral attitude, where both ends of the relationship are on a par with each other, tolerance seems to involve a superior subject, who tolerates, and an inferior subject, who is tolerated. Not all asymmetrical relations, however, are automatically insulting. There are several such relations that we consider morally

sound and even commendable, such as the relation between an educator and a pupil. Moreover, to a closer look, recognition, too, is a relationship that involves at least an initial asymmetry, since the recognizer is necessarily conceived as having the kind of superior standing that can grant or refuse recognition to the recognized. In this paper I want to propose the idea that tolerance is itself a form of recognition, one that does not result from the conjunction of two opposite evaluations, one negative and one positive, but is a kind of straightforward suspension or neutralization of a negative evaluation. Tolerance recognizes in the other the ability to achieve autonomous moral insight and therefore suspends the negative evaluative judgment toward a particular action or practice, out of confidence that in due time the other will correct herself. The motivation for tolerance is thus the psychological insight that self-correction alone (as opposed to external intervention) creates the conditions for truly held, stable, and enduring convictions. I will articulate my view drawing liberally on phenomenological resources, in particular: Husserl, but I will also include some folk-psychological remarks about the presuppositions and benefits of tolerance. The goal of this paper is not to produce a full-scale defense of a theory of tolerance, but simply to outline the way a coherent phenomenological theory of tolerance might look like<sup>1</sup> and thereby defend the idea that, *pace* Goethe, tolerance is itself a form of recognition, rather than the mere initial stage of a proper moral relationship.

### 1. *Respect, recognition, and tolerance*

The potential affinity between tolerance and recognition due to their respective asymmetry leads us to the first sentence of Goethe's maxim. In what sense does tolerance need to be a temporary attitude only? Critics have often pointed out that tolerance may have been commendable at the dawn of modernity, in a society that involved huge disparities and autocratic monarchs, but in a modern liberal state it ought to be replaced by a different, more egalitarian attitude such as respect. As Rainer Forst points out in his monumental study of tolerance, it is plausible to assume that Goethe had precisely this "permission conception" of tolerance (Forst 2013, pp. 27-28) in mind when he wrote that to tolerate is to insult. What seems

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1 For a more comprehensive and detailed defense of such a theory see Staiti forthcoming. Here I am interested in focusing on the idea of recognition, which I had not explored in the abovementioned publication.

insulting about the permission conception is that the alleged superiority of the monarch or majority group who tolerates is entirely contingent and therefore unjustified. Unlike the educator, whose “superiority” vis-à-vis the pupil is presumably founded on knowledge and pedagogical expertise, and therefore justified, the absolute monarch or the majority group just *happens* to wield unrestricted power over its subjects or the minority group. The unjustified nature of the power relations that underlie the permission conception cannot help but appear backward and unacceptable to an enlightened modern subject.

However, as Forst argues, the permission conception of tolerance does not need to be the *only* conception of tolerance available. Rather than replacing tolerance, respect can be the framework in which a different conception of tolerance becomes possible.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Forst introduces what he calls a “respect conception” (Forst 2013, p. 29), that is, a conception of tolerance founded on mutual respect among peers. On Forst’s construal, such a conception of tolerance may be sustainable in modern societies, too, because it amounts to an affirmation of the other’s moral standing, while maintaining a reservation about practices and beliefs that are at odds with the tolerator’s conception of the good (‘the ethical’). Accordingly, “[t]he person of the other is respected; her convictions and actions are tolerated” (Forst 2013, p. 30). Later in his inquiry, Forst further fleshes out the respect conception as the art “of separating ethical from moral truth” (Forst 2013, p. 506). In very brief compass, his view is that respect for the other as a rational moral agent (person) can coexist with a negative judgment about her particular conception of the good, i.e. her ethical outlook (see Darwall 2018 for a helpful analysis of the ethics/morality distinction). For Forst, the tolerant person knows how to relativize her own ethical outlook and will not demand that her (or her group’s) particular beliefs and convictions be imposed on others, if these beliefs and convictions do not pass the test of justification, i.e., if they cannot be held universally and reciprocally by all subjects involved, regardless of their ethical affiliations. Forst writes:

This is the crucial insight of toleration. A tolerant person will continue to live in accordance with his or her convictions and if necessary canvass for them, but he or she will not impose them on others who can reject these convictions on reciprocal and general grounds. Such a person is willing and

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2 For reasons of space I cannot dwell on the complexities of the concept of respect. See Mordacci 2012 for an informative discussion.

able to relativise his or her beliefs in the light of moral requirements because he or she recognises the difference between different contexts of justification” (Forst 2013, p. 455).

For instance, a tolerant Christian believer may continue to hold her beliefs about abortion, but will not want abortion to be outlawed because she sees that her belief cannot be justified universally and reciprocally in the public sphere. In so doing she respects the person of the non-Christian as a rational moral agent, whose freedom can only be limited on the basis of reasons that can be universally and reciprocally justified. At the same time, the Christian may continue to maintain a negative attitude toward the particular conception of the good (ethics) of her non-Christian peer.

Considering Forst’s presentation of the respect conception of tolerance, one might construe recognition and tolerance as two logically and psychologically opposite attitudes within the general moral framework of respect. If recognition requires that one does not only admit that a subject has a certain feature (conviction, belief, ethical outlook, etc.), but also that one embraces “a positive attitude towards her for having this feature” (Iser 2019), based on one and the same ideal of respect for others as rational moral agents, one can assume either a positive or a negative attitude towards the other’s particular ethical outlook. Respect-*cum*-positive attitude would then amount to recognition, while respect-*cum*-negative attitude would amount to tolerance. While both attitudes are informed by respect, and therefore morally sound, Goethe’s suggestion that tolerance should *lead* to recognition would still retain its plausibility even if we discard his notion that to tolerate is to insult. Recognition, i.e., respect-*cum*-positive attitude seems clearly more desirable than and hence as the ideal goal of tolerance, i.e., respect-*cum*-negative attitude.

While this configuration of the triad respect-recognition-tolerance resulting from Forst’s analysis may have its appeal and could be articulated in further detail, I believe it is fundamentally problematic on phenomenological and psychological grounds. By that I mean that (1) it fails to describe, and hence it implicitly mischaracterizes the intentionality at work in acts of tolerance and of tolerance as an attitude; (2) it rests on a highly abstract fragmentation of the concrete psychological subjects involved in acts of tolerance. Getting the phenomenology and psychology of tolerance right paves the way to understand tolerance as itself a kind of recognition, rather than its opposite within the general framework of respect.

## 2. *Problems with Forst's Conception of Tolerance and the Two-Component View*

The conception of tolerance just outlined is predicated upon a double split. Both the tolerator and the tolerated subject are split into their ethical self (the individual who is committed to a particular conception of the good) and their moral self (the person who owes or to whom we owe justification for the restriction of freedom). It seems that in acts of tolerance a subject ought to pull herself up from by her bootstraps and distance herself from what is supposed to be her deeply felt ethical outlook, in order to concede that it does not pass the test of universality and reciprocity; however, one thing is to acknowledge that there can be different conceptions of the good, but tolerance is at stake when the other's conception of the good *flies in the face of* my conception of the good, such that her conception of the good directly challenges or potentially poses a threat to mine. When that happens, the art of separating morality and ethics does not seem to help anymore. In our concrete experience, others are not given as two-layered entities split into a rational person and a culturally contingent individual. The other's conception of the good, as it is concretely expressed in her words and deeds, manifests who the other is as a moral person. The other's person shines through her commitment to a particular conception of the good. Her status as a rational moral agent is not experienced as some sort of residual dimension *behind* her identity as a concrete individual committed to a particular conception of the good. Rather, in and through this commitment her practical rationality comes to light and respecting the other as a moral agent is only possible by *taking seriously*, rather than relativizing, those commitments and beliefs in which such agency is concretely actualized. From the non-Christian's perspective, the problem with her Christian anti-abortion peer is precisely that she, a rational moral agent, fails to *see* the suffering that an unwanted pregnancy may cause to a woman. Continuing to uphold that belief amounts to a failure in the exercise of practical reason: it cannot be construed merely as a different conception of the good that one may continue to embrace in private. Conversely, from the Christian's perspective, the problem with her non-Christian pro-choice peer is precisely that she, a rational moral agent, fails to *see* the injustice caused by the annihilation of an innocent human life, no matter what other considerations may speak for that choice. The problem is, simply put, that that belief is *wrong* and that a person who upholds it is failing to exercise correctly her practical reason. Tolerance is called for when ethical beliefs are sincerely and deeply held, i.e., when they are recognized as actualizations of moral

reason, rather than confined to a parallel dimension where we can continue to believe whatever happens to work for us as long as we don't infringe upon the other's freedom. *That* would be insulting. When our ethical beliefs and practices are so loosely related to our identity as moral agents that we can neatly draw a line between the two dimensions and pick and choose between different contexts of justification, the resulting scenario is one of bland moral relativism, at best. In such a scenario, there is no room for tolerance, but only for a generalized moderate skepticism toward all ethical beliefs. Granted, this might turn out to be the *best possible* scenario for peaceful coexistence, but it is not a scenario where tolerance can be exercised. Tolerance is called for in a context characterized by *moral certainty*, or at least moral conviction beyond reasonable doubt. Tolerance is only conceivable in a scenario where the subjects involved hold *substantive moral beliefs which they claim are grounded in substantive moral experiences*. What remains to explore is the structure of tolerance in that scenario and the motivations to tolerate.

Before we do so, let us pause to consider the origin of the splits and dichotomies in Forst's account of the subjects involved in tolerance. They originate, I submit, in two shortcomings: (1) a phenomenologically insufficient analysis of what a conception of the good (ethics) amounts to; (2) the unquestioned idea that tolerance necessarily involves *two* components, one negative and one positive, which harks back to the seminal work on tolerance by Preston King (1976).

As for the first problem, let us ask, what is a conception of the good, be it a particular attitude toward a specific situation or a global *Weltanschauung*<sup>3</sup> as found in religions, totalizing political views, etc.? From a phenomenological viewpoint, which subscribes to a broadly realist metaethics,<sup>4</sup> a conception of the good is best characterized as a *response* to the values and disvalues that we encounter in our human lifeworld. Values aren't in the head. They are not projections of our mind onto a value-neutral world, like tags that we can attach to whatever happens to stir our desires. Rather, things stir our desires because they (either actually or purportedly) possess value. Values are first and foremost *axiological properties* of things,

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3 See Staiti 2017 and Berner 2006 for some further details on the concept of *Weltanschauung*.

4 I cannot expand on this point here, but interested readers can find a more extensive account in Staiti 2020. For a concise presentation of different versions of phenomenological metaethics see Drummond 2021.

such as the beauty of a landscape, the generosity of an action, etc. (Husserl 2004, pp. 68-72; Husserl 2020, pp. 1-3). For this reason, our valuations can be successful or unsuccessful at capturing the values of things around us, and they can be rationally scrutinized in terms of their legitimacy or lack thereof. In Husserl's language, valuations are positing acts (Husserl 2014, p. 229; Husserl 2019, p. 308), i.e., acts that posit an object as having certain properties, in particular, axiological properties. For sure, values are not just out there in the world (Husserl 2013, p. 303): they are correlates of the evaluative acts of subjects who live and feel, and whose ability to grasp certain values is influenced by their culture and upbringing. Nonetheless, values are never projections or psychological states: their being constituted in acts of valuation grants them no less objectivity than being constituted in acts of perception grants to physical things. As Husserl writes, in a passage worth quoting in full:

Just as things are units of sensory experiences and not themselves sensory experiences, and just as things are what they are whether they are experienced or not, so a value is a unit constituting itself in valuating experience and not itself valuating. And a value is what it is whether it is grasped in a valuating manner or not. Being a value, being good or beautiful, does not mean that anybody considers a thing to be of value, or that there is a widespread tendency in a community to value something, to love it, to be fond of it, or accordingly to desire it (Husserl 2019, p. 307).

On this view, a conception of the good arises and is handed down in history as a habitual set of responses to values, and such responses can be scrutinized in terms of their success or failure at grasping and articulating the values that they claim to capture or realize. Having a conception of the good, in a particular situation or as a global worldview, amounts to entertaining a claim about values and such claims can be no less valid or invalid than claims about perceptual things and states of affairs (Husserl 2019, p. 308). If my conception of the good entails that giving alms to the homeless realizes a value and is therefore good, while your conception of the good entails that the same action realizes a disvalue (for instance, because it discourages the homeless from getting a job) and is therefore bad, there is a clear contradiction in our respective value-positings and only one of us can be right. Respecting you as a rational moral agent means taking your value-positing seriously, not merely as a different conception of the good that you happen to endorse, but as a *claim* about what is axiologically the case. Accordingly, there must be paths within our concrete experience of homeless people, our responses to their demands, etc. to *decide* about the

matter at hand. In a Husserlian framework, the decisive legitimation of any positing intention, be it simple sensory perception or value-ception (*Wertnehmung*), occurs when that intention is intuitively fulfilled. There is, for instance, a difference between (1) vaguely entertaining the thought “human trafficking is wrong” and (2) experiencing the wrongness of human trafficking first-hand. The transition between (1) and (2) is the transition from empty axiological intending to fulfilled, and hence radically justified, axiological intending. In the axiological case, too, it is the occurrence of intuitive fulfilment and its continuing confirmation in ongoing, coherent lived-experience that provides the rational ground to *decide* axiological controversies

No matter how hard this can be, how long it may take, and how often such decisions may empirically occur, based on the premise that valuations are positing acts that grasp (or fail to grasp) values, the *decidability* of controversies on values is a necessary *a priori* consequence, regardless of the factual ability of human beings to come to such decisions. On a phenomenological account, the subjects involved in tolerance are not those who have learned to relativize their ethical conceptions of the good for the sake of morality. Rather, they are concrete individuals who are *wholly invested* in their valuations and are therefore convinced that their value-positings are legitimate, i.e., intuitively and coherently fulfilled, which necessarily *excludes* the validity of opposite value-positings. The pressing question for such an account is, then: *can* such subjects exercise tolerance? How does that look like at the level of their conscious experiences? Why would they be motivated to be tolerant and when would tolerance be the right attitude?<sup>5</sup>

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5 Note that all these questions can be addressed without any reference to the political dimension of laws and restrictions of freedom. If I am firmly convinced that giving alms to the poor is wrong, I don't necessarily need to want laws that punish the generous. Certainly, legislation will be informed by the claims about value and disvalue of legislators and the voters who put them in charge. The basic experience of tolerance, however, plays out at the level of direct engagement of people and groups in everyday contexts. As John Locke reported about the multi-confessional German village he visited on a diplomatic trip, even if the laws of a state are discriminatory on paper, if the concrete interactions and exchanges among the people are informed by tolerance, there will be an atmosphere of peace and flourishing. The reverse doesn't hold: as we know all too well in our present, written constitutions can overflow with principles of tolerance and mutual respect while the concrete individuals living under those constitutions are constantly at war and torn by irresolvable divides. Tolerance is not primarily an issue in political philosophy, but in moral psychology and phenomenology.



As I anticipated above, there is a second, more technical reason for the splits in Forst's theory. Forst accepts the idea, initially set forth by Preston King, that tolerance necessarily involves two components, an objection component and an acceptance component (Forst 2013, p. 18-20; King 1976, pp. 44-54). In King's construal, tolerance is interpreted as the "conjunction" (King 1976, p. 44) of a negative and a positive attitude toward a certain item, such that only the positive attitude (the acceptance component) determines behavior, while the negative attitude (the objection component) is exclusively confined to our mindset: "When we speak of an objection what we are basically concerned with is a disposition or assessment. When we speak of acceptance, what we are basically concerned with, by contrast, are those consequential acts that are assumed to flow from the disposition or assessment" (King 1976, p. 52). In very brief compass, for King what happens when we tolerate is that we refrain from acting out our objection to a certain item (belief, practice, group, etc.) because we object even more to what acting out that objection would necessarily imply: for instance (King's example), I may object to Catholics but I object even more to hangings, hence my decision to tolerate Catholics (and not act out my initial objection to them).

King's construal of tolerance has shaped the philosophical debate up to our present. Virtually all theories of tolerance on the philosophical market subscribe to the idea that tolerance needs to involve two components.<sup>6</sup> This creates an inevitable paradox: how can a negative and a positive evaluation be directed at *the same item*, without thereby causing a sheer contradiction, and therefore a logical and psychological impossibility? (see Lohmar 2012, p. 20 for a discussion of this problem and a convincing critique of Forst). In order to escape this difficulty, theorists of tolerance, including King, Forst and Lohmar, have argued that the *two* components of tolerance have to be directed toward *two* different items. For Forst, as we saw, the negative component is directed toward the other's conception of the good (ethics), while the positive component targets the other's standing as a moral subject; for King the initial objection (negative component) is superseded by an even stronger objection, such that we end up accepting (positive component) what we initially objected to; for Lohmar (2012, p. 28), we have tolerance when our moral aversion toward a certain action (negative component) is combined with

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6 See Staiti forthcoming for an overview of four such theories.

a second-order judgment about the personal circumstances in which that action was carried out and on that basis we decided that we do not want to see the other sanctioned (positive component).

Even if going into the strengths and weaknesses of these accounts would lead us too far afield, it seems that they all stand or fall with the Two-Component View of tolerance that underlies them. In the next section I argue that Two-Component Views don't get the intentionality of tolerance right. In sum, it doesn't seem phenomenologically plausible that to tolerate X means to *look away* from X and redirect our regard to our list of moral priorities (King), the other's status as a moral subject regardless of her conception of the good (Forst) or the circumstances in which X occurred (Lohmar). *Tolerating does not mean looking away.*

### 3. Phenomenology and the One-Component View of Tolerance

Suppose that while shopping at the grocery store you notice that a person in your neighborhood, who is known for having serious financial problems, is stealing food. Or suppose, again, that your friend drops a negative remark about giving alms to homeless people. Or, finally, suppose you find out that your child has developed the habit of writing aggressive posts on social media. We can imagine at least three scenarios:

1. In the first scenario, you simply don't care enough to act. As for the grocery store, it's none of your business if someone is stealing. Moreover, your friend may think whatever he wishes about homeless people and as long as he doesn't bother you, it's not your job to moralize him. Same goes for your child. After all, there is a widely spread culture of aggressiveness on the web and it won't be a single post that will make a difference. You are just too busy trying to make ends meet and meeting deadlines at work to be willing to stomach another argument with your child over the use of Internet. In all these cases, it would be out of place to say that you are tolerant. You are simply staying away from value-conflicts because you don't feel like these three clearly problematic actions demand anything of you. This first scenario, then, is not one in which tolerance may occur. Indifference may look like tolerance from an external perspective, but the attitude of the indifferent is completely different from the tolerator's.

2. In the second scenario, you are moderately skeptical about values and ethical claims in general...after all, who knows? What you call stealing,

an anarchist, who doesn't believe in property rights, would call something else, perhaps heroic display of defiance vis-à-vis the capitalist order. Same goes for your friend. What if he is right? Staunch conservatives have often argued against welfare along similar lines: it prevents people from trying to get jobs and sustain themselves without the crutches of government programs. And what if your child's posts on social media are rather a display of character and assertiveness? After all, it seems that a certain measure of aggression on social media pays remarkable political dividends these days, so what if reproaching your child ended up destroying what could be the beginning of a brilliant political career? In this scenario, too, there is no room for tolerance, because there is no clear value-judgment to begin with.

3. In the third scenario, you are *absolutely certain that what these people are doing is wrong*. There is no question that stealing is wrong, that cold-hearted contempt is not the right attitude toward the poor, and that aggressive posting on social media is rebarbative. The three people who engage in such activities have it all wrong: their actions *embody* axiologically invalid value-judgments. Perhaps none of them actively told herself: "stealing is right", "despising the homeless is good" or "writing aggressive posts maximizes value on the Internet", but what they *do* exhibits such (probably implicit) valuations. Normally, if you are certain of your valuations and it is in your power to do so, you will want to *intervene*. By intervention I mean whatever action is appropriate to act out your valid axiological conviction and correct the other's invalid valuation. An intervention can range from something very simple, such as reproaching or punishing your child, to something very ambitious, such as running for office in order to pass a law against hate speech on the Internet. Unlike Forst, I don't think that the problem of tolerance is primarily about trying to restrict other people's liberty with the force of law. That can be the extreme and most effective way to *intervene* in order to put an end to a morally wrong practice and correct those who engage in such a practice. But tolerance is already at play in much simpler everyday contexts, when despite your certainty about the rightness of your evaluation *you choose not to intervene*.

It is, then, the third scenario that creates the conditions for tolerance. Phenomenologically speaking, if you choose *not to intervene*, then some *modification* of your straightforward value-consciousness must be in play. Husserl has offered a conceptually and descriptively powerful account of the modification at play here with the concept of "neutralization" or "neutrality modification" (Husserl 2014, p. 213). In order to spell out what that means, let us reconsider the idea of a positing act. In simple perception,

for instance, I posit something as being: there is a tree in front of me. If the corresponding intention is intuitively and coherently fulfilled, then my positing is legitimate, or valid. At any time, however, the validity of my positing can become questionable if the data coming from my sensory experience no longer harmonize with the sense of what I was positing so far. The original positing can become modified and turn from “positing of being” to “doubt”: I now posit something that looks like a tree, but could be something else, e.g., a pole or a human being. In some cases, I can even come to a *negative* positing: I thought I was seeing a tree in the hazy light of dusk, but on closer inspection there is nothing there. All these modalities fall on the spectrum of *being*, even the final, negative positing. It is telling that the English language formulates the situation saying that *there is* nothing there. Husserl, however, points out that there is another option, which falls outside the spectrum of being, that is, *neutralizing* the positing act. In this attitude, I stop engaging in positing; I suspend my positing and abandon any commitment about how things are or are not. Husserl gives the examples of image consciousness and fantasy as neutralized perception, and recollection, respectively. My comportment toward the painted landscape on canvas is neutralized, since I do not posit a landscape as being actually on the wall. The same goes for my brother’s picture on my desk: I see my brother, but I don’t posit him as being on my desk, nor do I posit him as *not* being on my desk. When I daydream about a tropical beach, I do not posit a beach, not in the sense of engaging in negative positing, as it was the case with the tree at dusk, but precisely in the sense of having neutralized and put out of play *any kind* of positing.

What does this have to do with tolerance? We can describe something like a neutrality modification in the axiological domain, too. When I posit something as being of value, or when I posit a value as being actually valuable, I engage in a kind of comportment that is thoroughly analogous to its perceptual counterpart. Similarly, I can come to doubt the authenticity of a value in light of discordant experiences, and eventually I can even come to revoke the status of value to something that I previously took to possess it. I can also engage in straightforwardly negative valuations, such as positing that stealing is wrong, i.e., the corresponding actions realize a *disvalue* in the world. If the analogy with simple perception holds, then it is only plausible to assume that the neutrality modification can intervene in the sphere of valuing, too. In this case, I suspend my positive or negative valuation and comport myself neutrally toward the corresponding value or disvalue in a completely uncommitted manner. I do not let my positive or

negative valuation exert its motivational force on me, as much as I do not let the sensory material coming from the picture on my desk motivate me to posit my brother as being actually on my desk.

Tolerance, I submit, is entirely grounded on such neutralized valuing. The Two-Component Views of tolerance outlined above are tangled up in paradoxes because they are oblivious to the possibility of neutrality beside positive and negative valuations. The subject of tolerance, thus, does not need to be Janus-faced or split between a negative and a positive component: the attitude that underlies tolerance is a *straightforward, simple* valuation directed toward an action, belief, practice, etc. To be more precise, it is a *neutralized valuation that replaces or supersedes a foregoing negative valuation*. In this way, there is no paradox of tolerance to begin with. When we tolerate we hold the disvalue that the other wrongly posits as valuable firmly in grasp, only, we neutralize our negative act of valuation.

In order to understand *why* we would engage in such neutralization if we are certain of the validity of our negative valuation, we need to add one last element to our description. The kinds of negative valuations that are at play and become neutralized when we tolerate are carried out *in the context of empathy*.

Empathy in Husserlian phenomenology is both a class of experience in its own right and a further *modality*, in the framework of which other experiences can happen. At the basic level empathy is the perceptual experience of another subject based on the experience of the other's agency in her living body.<sup>7</sup> Once that experience occurs, however, a new dimension of my own experiencing opens up. The other's experiences become part of the horizon of my own experiences, even if I can't live them first hand as the other does. For instance, if I see you seeing a tree, empathy opens up the possibility that I see the tree "through you", as it were: I

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7 In the only study I am aware of on this matter, James Jardine (2017) has argued persuasively that Husserl's descriptions of empathy provide an analysis of what Axel Honneth calls elementary recognition. Even though I agree with Jardine that there is an affinity between Husserl's empathy and Honneth's elementary recognition, I am not persuaded that it is phenomenologically sound to place empathy on the "recognition" spectrum, as Honneth does. The reason is that recognition is an axiologically laden experience, whereas at the basic level described by Husserl, empathy is just the experience of another subject, prior to all valuations and position-takings about the other's standing as a person.

co-effectuate your perceptual positing of a tree via your own experiencing the tree. There is a difference between a situation where I see a tree, you see a tree and we are both aware of our respective experiences, and a situation where I see you seeing a tree and this kind of mediated seeing occurs in the medium of empathy, so to speak. Empathy as a modification of experience makes it possible for the lives of different subjects to interlace while remaining distinct. It is also responsible for the possibility of genuinely shared emotions, where one and the same experience is lived by two subjects who are united as one plural subject, or “we-subject” (Vincini/Staiti forthcoming).

Valuations, too, can occur in the context of empathy. I don’t do my valuing and see you do yours, but through you, I am turned toward the state of affairs that you value, such that part of my awareness of that state of affairs is constituted by your valuation. In these cases, by analogy with simple sensory perception, I can either go along with your valuation and co-effectuate your value-positing, or I can refuse to do so, because I see that your valuation is invalid. Similarly, if I see you talk to a tree, I can refer to the tree perceptually through your experience, but refuse to co-effectuate the positing of being in what I recognize as your hallucinatory experience of a tree-shaped human. In the axiological case, I can see that your behavior embodies a certain valuation and either go along and posit myself what you posit as valuable, or else judge your value-positing as invalid and posit a disvalue where you posit a value, instead. I can also decide to discontinue all positing of values and disvalues and neutralize my conscious act directed to the state of affairs you are intending and positing axiologically. If I do so, I am tolerating your valuation and the ensuing action or practice.

#### 4. *Tolerance as Recognition*

What remains to clarify is *why* I would neutralize a value-positing that I know to be valid and when it is reasonable to do so. In other words, we need to clarify the motivation for tolerance and the conditions upon which it is *right* to tolerate, i.e., to neutralize my (valid) negative value-positing in order not to let it conflict with your (invalid) positive value-positing.

Husserl aptly distinguishes between a general axiological attitude and a specifically moral attitude (Husserl 2004, pp. 244-247). In a general axiological attitude we are exclusively concerned with value and the attain-

ment of the maximum possible amount of value in what we do. In a moral attitude, by contrast, we are turned toward the *ego*, our own or the other's, whose actions and convictions will shape her moral personality. We do not look at actions, practices, etc. merely by reference to their general value (or lack thereof), but we consider them insofar as they contribute to determine the *person* who engages in them. In a moral attitude we care primarily about who we and the others will become as persons, rather than the amount of value that our actions, singly considered, realize in the world.

When we tolerate, we are engaging in a moral, rather than an axiological attitude, and what motivates us is the psychological insight that *changing one's wrong valuations takes time, but a self-correction is invariably more effective and enduring than a correction imposed from outside*. Tolerance is about letting the other, who is axiologically wrong, take her time and realize for herself, over the course of further experience, that her value-positings are invalid. People who have their valuations all wrong will likely dig in their heels and harden their hearts if they get a reproach or are directly confronted about their invalid valuations. The tolerant person knows from her own experience that the maturation of moral insights may take time, but that whenever it is possible, it is better to take that time, because a moral insight that has grown autonomously will last longer and have a more encompassing influence on one's life than a moral imposition.

If this description is correct, then *tolerance is itself a form of recognition*. The tolerant person recognizes the other's capacity for moral insight and holds her in such high esteem as to consider her fully capable to correct her wrong valuations by herself, in due time and with the necessary amount of experience. The tolerant person's characteristic refusal to intervene and the neutralized value-consciousness that phenomenologically grounds such non-interventionism are not motivated by indifference or moderate moral skepticism. Nor are they due to comparative considerations, as King and other proponents of the Two-Component view would have it. Rather, the tolerant person won't intervene because she cares about the other's autonomous moral maturation more than she cares about affirming the validity of her own value-positings. In this scenario, tolerance is far from being insulting. The other who realizes the tolerator's refusal to intervene despite her diverging valuation won't feel insulted or degraded to an inferior standing. Rather, they will gratefully acknowledge the tolerator's psychological wisdom and the willingness to let everyone mature their moral insights taking all the time that's needed.

Note that such an account of tolerance is not predicated upon a split between the moral and the ethical self. Recognizing the other's capacity for moral insight amounts to recognize that such capacity is actualized from time to time in the other's concrete commitments to a conception of the good. But conceptions of the good are always works-in-progress and they can go through significant adjustments and even upheavals in light of concrete experiences.

Given these premises it is relatively unproblematic to specify when tolerance is the right attitude. First, it is right to tolerate when one's valuations actually *are* valid. Suppose that someone has come to believe wild conspiracy theories absorbed from the Internet. That person will likely have very strong axiological convictions, which her or she believes are intuitively and coherently fulfilled; however, that fulfillment will be at best a *surrogate* (Staiti 2018, pp. 102-104) and not actual fulfilment. We can certainly imagine something like a tolerant conspiracy theorist, who firmly believes that in due time and with the right kind of information others will come to see the truth by themselves. Such a profile would certainly be more preferable than an *intolerant* conspiracy theorist, but the core problem remains: the tolerant conspiracy theorist has her axiology wrong, no matter how strongly she feels about it. The right attitude in her case would not be tolerance vis-à-vis others, but a critical scrutiny of her own valuation seeking to provide them with actual, as opposed to surrogate, intuitive fulfilment. Second, it is right to tolerate when it is *true* that the other will be able to correct herself and achieve autonomous moral insight in due time. A person struggling with substance abuse and addiction, for instance, may be severely impaired and unable to see the wrongness of her actions, no matter how much time we give her. In this case, intervening might be right thing to do. Finally, it is right to tolerate if we can *afford* letting the other take her time and develop her own moral insight. In some cases, even if we know that the best-case scenario would be letting the other mature by herself, we have to intervene before the axiologically wrong person does harm to herself and others.

In the examples above, I may refrain from intervening when I see the destitute person stealing from the grocery store because I know that in due time she will see for herself that stealing is wrong, but, for instance, if I knew that this person is on parole and even a minor offense could send her to prison for a long time, harming herself and others, I may opt for the second best scenario and choose to intervene. Similarly, I may not have the



time to let my child realize for himself that aggressive posting is wrong, because he could get into very serious trouble with the law very soon if he continues. In morally sensitive matters, time is sometimes a luxury we cannot afford, even when we know that for the other's moral character it would be much better to wait and let her correct her valuations when the time is ripe.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, let us return briefly to Goethe's maxim. If the above is correct, tolerance does not need to be insulting and it also does not need to *lead* to recognition. It is itself a form of recognition, one that already gives the other what we owe to her. Tolerance, as we saw, recognizes in the other the capacity for moral insight and it is motivated by psychological evidence, namely, that *autonomous* moral insight makes for a stronger and more enduring moral personality. Nonetheless, there is a grain of truth to Goethe's intuition that tolerance cannot be a definitive attitude. On the account I provided, the exercise of tolerance is ideally ordered toward a situation where the other *finally* reaches the desired moral insight and, accordingly, no longer engages in invalid value-positing. The tolerator does hope for a future situation where tolerance will no longer be required because the other will have corrected herself. This fact, however, does not detract from tolerance being a form of recognition. Rather, tolerance is the most extreme form of recognition, in fact, the *only* form of recognition we can exercise in good conscience even with people whose valuations we know are wrong.

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SECTION 3

*ACTING RECOGNITION*



# LIFE AND ETHICS

Piergiorgio Donatelli

## *Abstract*

In this paper, I will deal with the notion of form of life, specifically in relation to the domains of freedom and autonomy. I will compare and contrast the positions of those who reject the concept of form of life in order to account for freedom and autonomy (e.g. Peter Singer) with those who appeal to a form-of-life-view in order to establish the traditional understanding of the spheres of life (Anscombe). Differing from both kinds of positions, I will suggest that we should appeal to forms of life in order to account for freedom and autonomy: freedom and autonomy have been conceived as formed ways of living, as initiations of living beings into social and cultural spaces (McDowell). Forms of life should not be thought of though as the successful initiation of our natural being in the realm of second nature. Rather, they are best described as the domestication of the vulnerabilities of life which leave their form impressed on the habits and the natural rhythms of life: this is argued especially following Stanley Cavell's lead.

*Keywords:* Forms of life, Bioethics, Second Nature.

1. I will start by presenting a contrast about the concept of human life.<sup>1</sup> The origins and development of bioethics as an academic discipline in the 1970s may be read as a confrontation with the remains of the tradition of natural law, a confrontation with, and a criticism of, the moral culture expressed by this tradition – which articulates the idea that nature has an intrinsic order which can be devised through the proper use of reason and that from such an order practical norms and a set of virtues can be derived. This understanding of nature was radically marginalized or actually swept away of the scene by the classics of modern moral and political thought

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1 P. Donatelli, *The Politics of Human Life. Rethinking Subjectivity*, Routledge, London 2021 (translation of *La vita umana in prima persona*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2012); *Manières d'être humain. Une autre philosophie morale*, Vrin, Paris 2015.

in the 17th and 18th centuries starting with Thomas Hobbes (with notable differences among them). Yet the intimacies of human life were very little touched by this radical transformation of paradigms. Women, pregnancy, sexuality and death were generally left out of this transformation in conceptual frameworks. There are minor lines of contestation: much later on John Stuart Mill, for example, argued that the family (comprising issues related to gender, reproduction and child rearing) could not be regarded as providing an exception to the democratic rules which govern the other areas of society (which can be summarized under the two headings of prudence and responsibility). We need to wait though for the birth of academic bioethics in the Seventies for a direct confrontation with the idea that human life has an order of its own which rules out the possibility of moral deliberation and choice. Abortion and euthanasia, along with the other bioethical issues, are treated, especially by utilitarians, but also by defenders of right theories (e.g. Judith Jarvis Thompson), as issues which concern interests, autonomy and freedom and as such they belong to the conceptual space of moral deliberation and choice. The polemical target of such diverse approaches is the conception by which certain areas of life such as birth, death and sexuality are not open to moral deliberation and choice at all, but are rather considered areas which signal the background of choice and deliberation. They shape the contours of human life, what makes human life what it is: we are humans because we are born and die in certain ways and because sexuality is a certain thing and has a certain meaning. We find this view in Aquinas, it may be found in phenomenology which contributed in its own way to the revitalization of the traditional view (say Jaspers and his notion of limit experiences), it is elegantly argued by Elizabeth Anscombe who went back directly to Aquinas, yet also, surprisingly perhaps, by Jürgen Habermas in his book on *The Future of Humanity*. If you'd like a smaller and more compact example of the contrast within the analytic scene in philosophy you may consider Peter Singer and Elizabeth Anscombe.

My way of framing this contrast is the following. On the one side we have those who argue that all areas of human life (and animal life: but I won't discuss this) are amenable to analysis in terms of interests, preferences, pleasure; they can and they need to be treated as internal to the space of personal autonomy and freedom. They argue this in opposition to those who hold that there are areas of life which are not open to this analysis in terms of interests and preferences. According to Anscombe, say, life has an order, understood in teleological terms, which is expressed in emotions, attitudes and norms (characteristically under the form of prohibitions) regulating such areas. The lack of any space of choice in such areas signals



what unites and actually constitutes humanity. Prohibitions in these areas are a safeguard of humanity. So, for example, Anscombe would argue that humans are born from women, sexuality is aimed at reproduction in the appropriate context of marriage, and this comes with the perception of what honors the body seen from the point of view of the virtue of chastity and with absolute prohibitions regarding sexual acts which are not intrinsically aimed at reproduction. Human life is like that, has these limits, and prohibitions against transgressing such limits are a defense of human life itself. We have here an understanding of human life that uncovers a form in it. In Anscombe's view (the traditional Christian view) human life comes with a form illustrated by a number of aspects such as attitudes, say honor, virtues like chastity, prohibitions such as the one against "sodomy". We can either say that the form of life generates social practices and norms or that a form is illustrated by a number of aspects which also comprise social practices and norms. According to the first view, norms are actually derived from a certain understanding of human life (which is the traditional project of deriving ethics from metaphysics). According to the second, form is shown by attending to this host of aspects: this is the Wittgensteinian approach taken by Anscombe and other authors such as Peter Winch. Anscombe presents a form of life approach which explains normativity in terms of minute aspects and details of life. She works in the direction of connecting norms (moral prohibitions especially) to the conceptual organization of life.<sup>2</sup>

The opponents of this view want to bring such areas of life within the space of moral thought and deliberation – the space of prudence and responsibility, as Mill argues. They do this by rejecting altogether the idea that human life has an order, a form, of its own, and that attitudes and norms can be derived from a proper conceptual understanding of life or be inscribed in it. By freeing human life from a conceptual understanding of this kind they open a space for the operation of other ethical and normative dispositives, those enacted by the notions of interests, preferences and the like. They open a space for freedom, prudence and responsibility by freeing life from what was taken as its form. According to Peter Singer there is nothing in the attitudes, emotions, reactions, and words used in such contexts, say in pregnancy, that informs us of what is right and wrong. By freeing such areas of life and experience from any internal order, normativity can be installed at a different level, where we can account for interests

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2 G.E.M. Anscombe, *Contraception and Chastity*, in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics*, eds. By M. Geach and L. Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, pp. 170-191.

and their maximization. At this level, removed from life, as it were, we can account for interests and freedom. So we can see how Singer needs the language of preferences, interests and persons, removed from the conceptual dimension of life which makes no room for them, in order to defend a certain set of values.<sup>3</sup>

This contrast may be properly framed in terms of the appeal to the concept of “form of life”, as I have partially done already. On the one side, life is shown to have a form illustrated by (or capable of generating) the attitudes, emotions, words and norms making up life with reproduction, death, sexuality, intimacy, family, etc. Thus the form of life comes with norms: normativity is inscribed in life. This sort of appeal to the concept of form of life goes together with a criticism of contemporary freedoms in matters of intimate life (assisted reproduction, surrogacy, euthanasia, LGBT+ themes). Such freedoms, which require the idea that the relevant areas of life are open to deliberation and choice, are considered as attacks on humanity, as Anscombe argues; freedom here jeopardizes human life. On the other side, we have those who wish to defend contemporary freedoms and the search for happiness and in order to do so they reject altogether the appeal to the concept of form of life. Life has no form at all: the various aspects tied to notions such as giving birth, say, form no conceptual unity, nothing conceptual hangs together around these diverse aspects. Normativity is placed somewhere else, removed from life.

2. I have introduced this contrast in order to show how both horns are inadequate and how the contrast itself can be redescribed. On the one side, we have views such as Anscombe’s that appeal to the form of humanity and in doing so they cancel from the scene the inventiveness and freedom which belong to these areas of life and especially those earned in our recent history with the discovery of new ways of giving birth, new ways of facing death, new ways of loving each other which are good and exemplary of new ways of being (new ways of being human).<sup>4</sup> On the other side, we have the views that reject such an appeal to the intrinsic form of life in order to claim inventiveness and freedom, though placed away from the conceptual dimension of life, away from the motley of attitudes, responses, and sentiments entangled in ordinary language and thought. There can be

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3 P. Singer, *Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics*, St. Martin’s Griffin, New York 1996.

4 Cf. P. Donatelli, *Manières d’être humain*, cit.

room though for a different view which argues that life has a form, life has a conceptual articulation, which hosts inventiveness and freedom.

One way to overcome the opposition between the two horns at play in the contrast is to argue that the space of autonomy and freedom is natural to us, that it belongs to the natural form of human life.<sup>5</sup> According to this view, freedom and autonomy should not be conceived in opposition to human nature, they are rather the result of the education of human nature which brings into view its proper form. The human form of life is shown in its educated condition. We have two theses here: autonomy and freedom are natural to human beings; human nature is shown in the form it takes in its educated condition. This view is an elaboration of Aristotelian ideas and is defended by John McDowell. The crucial idea here is that life has a form which is the result of an activity of formation, of education, *Bildung*. The human form of life is formed through education and culture, the logical form of culture is the form of nature or, as we can also say, the logical form of human nature is the form acquired as second nature. The appropriate human shape is instilled into lives by cultural upbringing (ethical upbringing in Aristotle).<sup>6</sup>

McDowell offers a significant example of a view of human nature which presents it as endowed with a form. The logical form of reasons is not remote from life, it is actually the proper form of human life: “we need to see ourselves as animals whose natural being is permeated with rationality”.<sup>7</sup> His argument is helpful in order to keep in view the position that sees that education and culture are natural to humans and that the shape of what is human is actually the shape of culture (the space of reasons). This can be argued against the views such as Singer’s who do not want to read the nat-

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5 I have elaborated more on what follows in my *Moral Perfectionism and Virtue*, in “Critical Inquiry”, 45, 2019, n. 2, pp. 332-350; *Wittgenstein, l’etica e la filosofia antica*, in “Giornale di metafisica”, n.s., 41, 2019, n. 2, pp. 540-552.

6 McDowell is interested in arguing that the space of reasons, the space of human intelligibility, is natural to humans. As he writes: “Such initiation is a normal part of what it is for a human being to come to maturity, and that is why, although the structure of the space of reasons is alien to the layout of nature conceived as the realm of law, it does not take on the remoteness from the human that rampant Platonism envisages. If we generalize the way Aristotle conceives the moulding of ethical character, we arrive at the notion of having one’s eyes opened to reason at large by acquiring a second nature. I cannot think of a good short English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*”. J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1984, p. 84.

7 J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, cit., p. 85.

ural in terms of human forms of intelligibility and leave it to the sciences to say what human nature amounts to. It can also be argued against the views such as Anscombe's which do not wish to place the human form in their upbringing, as she rather argues that upbringing needs to reflect the human form (even though she also holds that this can be seen only in its properly educated condition).

I am interested in taking McDowell's view as an example of a family of views which insist on the idea that the human form is a matter of human formation. I want to lay emphasis on two features, tied to this approach: the criticism of transcendental views, and the criticism of the value-conferring model. They are both interesting in order to see the stakes of appealing to forms of life in the perspective which understands form as formation. As for the first feature, the emphasis on formation goes in the direction of showing that normativity is inscribed in the attitudes, practices and activities that describe a certain area of life. Normativity is found in the ways in which forms of living are shaped culturally and socially. We need to attend to this web of practices in order to uncover normativity. We need to understand how children are educated (following Aristotle) and this requires an attention to the details of life, not only to general patterns and rules.

This is argued against the idea that normative criteria are required to operate over the materials offered by ways of living. The latter is the idea defended by Peter Singer and shared by a conception of philosophical ethics conceived as theory. A "theory" in this sense offers the grounds of moral thought which are measured against ordinary thought which is treated as naïve, intuitive, as merely habitual. This view originates perhaps in Henry Sidgwick's *The Methods of Ethics*. A criticism of this notion of philosophical ethics conceived of as theory may be found in John Dewey, as when he writes: "Confusion ensues when appeal to rational principles is treated as if it were merely a substitute for custom, transferring the authority of moral commands from one source to another". Moral theory "does not offer a table of commandments in a catechism [...]. It can render personal choice more intelligent, but it cannot take the place of personal decisions, which must be made in every case of moral perplexity".<sup>8</sup> The point Dewey makes is that theory, in his use of the notion, does not offer the grounds of moral thought as a set of normative criteria placed in its special and isolated sphere, rather it offers instruments in order to enrich and enlighten moral thought which are based on one's response to problems. According

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8 J. Dewey, *Ethics*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 7, eds. By J. A. Boydstone and B. Levine, Southern Illinois Press, Carbondale, Ill. 1985, pp. 165-166.

to Dewey normativity is internal to how life is shaped in habits, personal sensibility, and modes of reflection. The source of moral problems and of moral thought is internal to forms of life so conceived. This is argued against the thesis according to which normative criteria transcend ordinary moral sensibility and thought, as is claimed in the tradition that goes from Sidgwick to Singer. On the contrary, normativity is internal to forms of life. This means that normativity is reconstructed bottom-up as a family of moves which belong to a determinate set of activities and modes of living. This is an anti-transcendental thesis.<sup>9</sup>

The second feature of this view is that the rejection of the transcendental point of view helps to dismantle a very powerful picture connected to the notion of theory operating in the no-forms-of-life approaches such as Singer's. It is an influential picture tied to the modern view according to which the world bears no human, or more specifically moral, features, whereas human and moral features in the form of secondary qualities and values are projected on, or conferred to, the world. The view is explicitly advanced by important authors in moral theory such as Sidgwick, G.E. Moore and Thomas Nagel, and it is responsible for a familiar shape taken by discussions on the issues related to life in which the philosophical point is to confer value on states of affairs according to criteria which are presented as independent from the description of such states of affairs: say, conferring value on organisms in environmental ethics, conferring value on unprivileged situations in political philosophy. Against this view, the form of life approach suggests we work within the bundle of relations of dependency, coexistence and meaning and from this point of view work toward earning a critical response. This view has been tied to strands in the ethics of care by Sandra Laugier who has developed it fruitfully, also showing its connection to Wittgenstein's anti-transcendentalism.<sup>10</sup>

We find here a general view that may be specified in different directions. It helps to recover the possibility of conceiving of forms of life as internally shaped by thought and reflection. There is a Wittgensteinian point, shared by pragmatism (say in Dewey), which is relevant for our argument. Reflection belongs to ordinary activities. The logic of language, as Wittgenstein writes, does not reside in a super-luminescent sphere separate and remote from ordinary activities: "Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a

9 I am using the term in the sense worked out by Amartya Sen in his *The Idea of Justice*, Allen Lane, London 2009.

10 S. Laugier, *The Vulnerability of Forms of Life*, in "Raisons politiques", 57 (2015), n. 1, pp. 65-80; Ead., *Care, environnement et éthique globale*, in "Cahiers du Genre", 59 (2015), n. 2, pp. 127-152.

chat, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing".<sup>11</sup> Normativity, that is the potential for critical moves, is found in the concrete space of bonds of dependence, in the network of forces (to echo Michel Foucault), in the whirl of organism, as Cavell calls it, that attunes aspects of life into a whole where recurrent patterns can be detected.<sup>12</sup>

To go back to the initial contrast: the rationality we show when we reflect on, and criticize, a circumstance requires attention to the concrete life contexts. Attention to the detail is required in order to detect a pattern, a form: form is not imposed, it is part of the form of life. With McDowell and Aristotle, it is only by understanding how one can be educated and learn to go on autonomously that we can get a sense of how virtue works: the virtuous person is someone initiated into a specific form of life. There is no access to the form of virtue and more generally to the form of life sideways-on, we need to pay attention to the details of the initiation into a form of living. Therefore, the issues of education, formation and *Bildung* also shed light on the importance of detail, nuance, on the large variety of critical instruments, on the shifting borders of rich human description and criticism, matters which tie normativity in this perspective to the humanistic disciplines and to the issue of a specificity of the humanities (the importance of imaginative literature, film, and tv series).

This view sides with the Wittgensteinian moment of Anscombe when she argues that the form of life is to be detected in a host of minor aspects, in the subtle life with our concepts. The form is not remote from life as Singer argues. Yet this form hosts critical reflection. The form, that is, the patterns we may read into the host of aspects, does not respond to some lower immutable stratum, it responds to us, though in a way which may go deep into the vertical dimensions of life, a depth Anscombe sometimes calls mystical (as in the example of the kind of attack on humanity carried out by imagining disposing of corpses by leaving them with the garbage). This sense of depth though lies on the surface of our activities, which can bear this gravity and this density. This is something which poetry can teach and show: the incredible depth which may lie on the surface of a few lines on the page. This is the depth that may strike us (not every time) in the issues of life and death, of sexuality, of human bonding and separation.

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11 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009, § 25.

12 S. Cavell, *The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*, in Id., *Must We Mean What we Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, p. 52.

The Wittgensteinian lesson is that the form of this depth is our form, the form of our words and attitudes, which is mobile, as are human activities. Against Anscombe's revival of natural law, though, we need to recover the capacity to take turns and make moves conceived of as internal potentialities of words and attitudes. So the idea here is that form is not remote from us: it is not remote from life, it is not remote from us.

3. I now want to point to one aspect and introduce a further perspective. The second-nature conception of form of life conceives of freedom and autonomy as the achievements of a successful transformation of first nature. We can think of freedom, or, as we might say, of human mobility in thought, vision and action, as what is available from within a space of perception and reason shaped by second nature. The Aristotelian and McDowellian line insists that we need to be properly placed in second nature in order to be considered as proper agents and human beings. Mobility is the sign of a well-formed space of reasons, of a functioning habitat. A form of life is conceived thus as a successful life experiment. This is also close to the view put forward by Rahel Jaeggi.

Another perspective can be developed if we criticize the idea of successful transformation. We can do this following Cavell's lead. The notion of successful transformation serves the purpose of defending an anti-transcendental position, a position which argues that internal resources are all that we have and that we need. In McDowell's view, if we think of first nature as a kind of material that can be successfully transformed into second nature, the skeptical worries concerning the standpoint of reason dissolve and we see how reason comes naturally to human beings, and thus we do not need to posit an external perspective for reason, we do not need to transcend what comes naturally to human beings. Yet this idea of naturalness comes at a price, as it assumes the achievement of our proper place in the space of reason and autonomy, the achievement of what is properly home to human beings. We can question this, we can question this ideal conception of home and argue that we never inhabit a space of reasons in such a way, that we are never at home in such a way, that home is always a place of rejection and crisis: because we deny it and because we are denied by it; home is a place of estrangement as well. Let me develop this briefly. We can try to show how life is both familiar and strange to us. Our body, words, emotions, attitudes have a power to express, to say, to put us in relation with others, we can count on them, we can count on ourselves, – because they can also fail us: our confidence in ourselves

can fail us.<sup>13</sup> Their power lies in connections, bonds, and attunements that are intrinsically open to failure and crisis. It relies on a confidence in ourselves that may be lost and on a trust in others that can be put into jeopardy, and this belongs to the fact the attunements in language, gesture and understanding are not a given, they are experimental, they try out situations. Concepts are projected onto new situations, as Cavell argues, and this implies experiment and adventure which comes with the possibility of failure and loss of orientation.<sup>14</sup>

We should think of human language and culture as a way of dealing with such crises and failures. Life is difficult; mortality, otherness, interiority and expression are all both natural and difficult. Giving form to life is a matter of formation which encounters such a resistance. The form of life is shaped by the encounter with the resistance our life opposes to its being molded in habits, relations, commerce, exchanges, loves. The second-nature conception thinks of forms of life as habitual (from Aristotle to Dewey and McDowell) and argues that habits host reflection and criticism. Whereas I want to say that such habits can turn into something which is unnatural, uneasy, extraneous. In crucial experiences – the body in illness, the breaking of personal communication and understanding, foreignness in one's community or in an actual foreign community, yet also in the many kinds of minor and repetitive losses of the intimate contact and confidence with life which shape the texture of everyday life – life faces us as something foreign and distant, it comes to us from some other place, from elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> This experience of extraneity is the place for reflection and criticism, it encourages a specific form of thought about our needs which may call into question an entire form of life. Reflection does not operate as a merely internal activity as in Aristotle, McDowell and Dewey. Reflection is prompted and nurtured by the experience of being forced away from life, pushed to its margins. Naturality and homeness are thus thought of as the domestication of such episodes of crisis; naturality is never merely habitual because it is the result of having to a certain extent and only temporarily

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13 P. Donatelli, *Il lato ordinario della vita*, il Mulino, Bologna 2018.

14 S. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, New York 1979, pp. 180-190.

15 On the importance of locating crisis in the minute nuances of the everyday see S. Cavell, *The Wittgensteinian Event*, in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2005, pp. 192-212; V. Das, *Textures of the Ordinary. Doing Anthropology after Wittgenstein*, Fordham University Press, New York 2020; P. Donatelli, *Perfectionist Returns to the Ordinary*, in "Modern Languages Notes", 130 (2015), n. 5, pp. 1023-1039.



overcome foreignness and crisis. What I have described in general terms is Stanley Cavell's understanding of forms of life which draws on a reading of Wittgenstein and on other intellectual episodes, and which was pursued by a number of authors such as Veena Das and Sandra Laugier.

This has consequences for the problem I have presented. I have started with the contrast between those who reject the concept of form of life in order to account for freedom and autonomy and those who appeal to a form-of-life-view in order to establish the traditional understanding of the intimate spheres of life. I have then suggested that we should appeal to forms of life in order to account for freedom and autonomy: freedom and autonomy are formed ways of living, initiations of living creatures into social and cultural spaces. That freedom and autonomy are formed modes of living accounts for depth against thinness of normativity. As a last move I have argued for a different conception of freedom and autonomy as formed modes of living. Formation cannot be accounted for in terms of habits and naturality, as the successful initiation and formation of our natural beings in the realm of second nature. Rather it is a different kind of formation, it is best described not as the stability and reliability of second nature (form of life as the successful initiation into second-nature) but as the domestication of the vulnerabilities of life which leave their form impressed on the habits and the natural rhythms of life.

I have started with the issues of human life tied to bioethics. We can appreciate the contribution of this distinctive perspective to such debates. Intimate spheres of life are areas of human formation and the polemical target is not only the two horns, metaphysical views which steal from us freedom and creativity on the one side and thin conceptions which steal from us depth and personality on the other. The polemical target is also with second-nature views which don't see the space of failure, crisis and loss as crucial moments in order to elaborate what counts as living well, what counts as happiness. Failure and crisis are fundamental in order to elaborate critical postures.

Life's naturality in this perspective lies in this vulnerability to loss and crisis and in its power to recover, compensate and make room for ruptures in the natural rhythms accommodating loss. It is thus not a model of perfect formation, of successful initiation. As Cavell shows, it requires a repetitive domestication of what eludes intimacy and naturalness. This can help us to think of the array of various issues in question around the re-emergence of the question of life in our societies. We need to look at the concrete rhythms of life, how life endures embedded in forms of coexistence and social relations. Freedom is also found in the power to recover and accom-

modate, to take turns and persist. Normativity is seen at work in the forms of life (anti-transcendentalism), that is, in the ways habits and naturalities are reconstituted, re-earned. The critical task is that of earning an authority over one's life against life's departing from us. Stanley Cavell's lesson is that we should educate our experience sufficiently so that it is worthy of trust.<sup>16</sup> We need to be able to take an interest in our experience, to find words for it, in order to have an authority in one's experience. What I have been arguing is that this authority is best thought of not as the successful formation of character which installs the authority of the self in animal first nature but as the learning to take an interest in one's life, to find words for it and gain an authority from within the crises and losses that disrupt its rhythms and naturalities.<sup>17</sup>

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16 S. Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1981, p. 12 along with the entire "Introduction. Words for a Conversation".

17 The present article is part of a larger chapter titled "Ethics and the Details of Life" to be published in a collection edited by Veena Das and Perig Pitrou.

# RESPECT BEYOND PERSONS

Roberto Mordacci

## *Abstract*

The principle of respect is usually intended as respect for persons. Kant maintained that only persons could be the object of a duty of respect. Yet, a number of strategies have been proposed to make the principle more inclusive, mainly by expanding the circle of those covered by the principle. This article proposes a different strategy, based on a reformulation of the principle. Respect is the encounter of different powers, confronting each other at different levels and generating different kinds of duties. We should recognise that autonomy is a form of power, but it is not the only power that we have. We are also living beings, and natural entities, and these are also forms of power. So, at each level, there is respect for the kind of power facing us and this implies different levels of responsibility. This strategy is better than expanding the circle of “autonomous agents” and better than trying to ground rights for living beings and for natural entities.

*Keywords:* Respect, Kant, Animals, Persons, Power.

## 1. *Is respect only owed to persons?*

The principle of respect is usually intended as respect for persons.<sup>1</sup> The common understanding, on a largely Kantian basis, is that respect is appropriate, and even mandatory, when referring to autonomous beings, and only persons are considered autonomous beings.

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1 R. Downie, E. Telfer, *Respect for Persons*, Allen & Unwin, London 1969; A. Donagan, *The Theory of Morality*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1977; C. Cranor, *Kant's Respect-for-Persons Principle*, in “International Studies in Philosophy”, 12, 1980, pp. 19-39; T.E. Hill, Jr., *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; S. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006.

Therefore, other living beings (and the environment) are excluded from its scope. Kant famously stated that we have no direct duties to nonhuman animals and that moral obligation is owed only to rational beings. Kant says, “As far as reason alone can judge, a human being has duties only to human beings (himself and others), since his duty to any subject is moral constraint by that subject’s will”.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean, though, that we have *no* duties *with regard to* nonhuman animals, only that we have no direct duties *to them*. In fact, according to Kant, we have *direct* duties only to persons, but, in the case of nonhuman animals, we ought to treat them with some respect as an expression of our respect for ourselves. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant says that “Any action whereby we may torment animals, or let them suffer distress, or otherwise treat them without love, is demeaning to ourselves”.<sup>3</sup> In Kant’s opinion, treating animals poorly is a sign that a person is likely to mistreat human beings as well, so we have to respect animals as a part of our character, in order to reinforce our disposition to respect persons:

violent and cruel treatment of animals is [...] intimately opposed to a human being’s duty to himself [...] for it dulls his shared feeling of their suffering and so weakens and gradually uproots a natural disposition that is very serviceable to morality in one’s relations with other human beings.<sup>4</sup>

There can only be *indirect* duties with regard to human animals, but they are quite relevant ones: e.g. not to treat them with violence or cruelty, not to perform “agonizing physical experiments for the sake of mere speculation, when the end could also be achieved without these”, and to show “gratitude for the long service of an old horse or dog (just as if they were members of the household)”.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, this restrictive interpretation of the principle of respect sounds unsatisfying nowadays, since we incline to recognize that we owe at least *some* respect *directly to* nonhuman animals and the environment, and Kant’s perspective seems unduly anthropocentric in this matter.

Several strategies have been deployed to expand the scope of the principle, mainly concentrating on the object of the principle itself: to whom is respect owed? Does the limitation to rational beings really exclude non-hu-

2 I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), vol. 6, p. 442, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften (KGS)*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1900-. I will only make reference to the volume and page in the *KGS*, as reported in the Cambridge Edition, where available; here, tr. by M. Gregor, ed. by L. Denis, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017.

3 I. Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 27, p. 710.

4 I. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6, p. 443.

5 *Ibid.*

man animals? These issues have raised extended discussion. James Rocha has argued that certain behaviours of animals show that they can be minimally rational in the same sense in which we consider children minimally rational at the earliest stages of development.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Peter J. Markie maintains that, since respect is not something to which moral subjects have a right, but is a form of duty that depends on the moral potential of the subjects, the privilege accorded to human infants, severely disabled people and human embryos is warranted, since they have a greater moral potential than those of non-human animals.<sup>7</sup>

Nowadays, this privilege can be seen as a serious limitation of the principle, which makes it a hallmark of anthropocentrism and speciesism. As a remedy to this, some authors have suggested that Kantian premises – if not Kant’s texts<sup>8</sup> – allow for more inclusive, non-speciesist accounts. Allen Wood has suggested that Kant’s position is conditioned by the adoption of a *personification principle*, by which the rational nature is respected only in actual, individual persons; but a *logocentric* (not anthropocentric) ethics, as Kant’s own, is not committed to the personification principle; rather, “It should hold that honouring rational nature as an end in itself sometimes requires us to behave with respect toward nonrational animals if they bear the right relations to rational nature”.<sup>9</sup> Christine Korsgaard has argued at length that the principle of respect applies to creatures as ends in themselves, and animals constitute ends in themselves insofar as they are beings for whom things can be good or bad absolutely.<sup>10</sup>

In the context of bioethical debate, the principle of respect is understood mainly as respect for autonomy. As such, it is applied only to autonomous agents, but some authors have suggested that primates, and especially chimpanzees, can be considered autonomous, since they satisfy the two basic conditions of autonomy, i.e., *liberty*, the absence of controlling influences, and *agency*, self-initiated intentional action.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the

6 J. Rocha, *Kantian Respect for Minimally Rational Animals*, in “Social Theory and Practice”, 41, 2, April 2015, pp. 309-327.

7 P. J. Markie, *Respect for People and Animals*, in “The Journal of Value Inquiry”, 38, 2004, pp. 33-47.

8 O. O’Neill, *Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, Suppl. Vol. 72, 1998, pp. 211-228.

9 A. Wood, *Kant on Duties Regarding Nonrational Nature*, in “Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society”, cit., pp. 189-210, p. 197.

10 C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures. Our Obligations to the Other Animals*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018.

11 T.L. Beauchamp, V. Wobber, *Autonomy in Chimpanzees*, in “Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics”, 35, 2014, pp. 117-132.

principle of (respect for) autonomy is an unfinished business, requiring further work in order to determine whether it applies to children as well as to chimpanzees.<sup>12</sup>

More radically, Tom Regan and Peter Singer have argued against what Bernard Williams called “The Human Prejudice”,<sup>13</sup> refusing any anthropocentric view and any idea of human superiority. Peter Singer’s famous argument against speciesism is based on the idea that what deserves respect is the ability to feel pain and pleasure, an ability we share with animals, so that any criterion distinguishing humans from non-humans is equivalent to racism or genderism.<sup>14</sup> Tom Regan argues in terms of rights, and his thesis is that we should recognize that animals have rights and should respect them since they are “subjects of a life”: this is all that is needed to have rights and to generate a duty of respect.<sup>15</sup>

The limitation of scope is made even more unsustainable by the fact that common language has recently adopted, as quite natural ones, expressions like “respect for animals”, “respect for living creatures” and “respect for the environment”: is this usage warranted by an adequate theory of respect? Is it just a fashionable way of using the principle, devoid of a serious theoretical and historical basis? Or should we offer a theoretical basis for the principle such that it can account for this use of language? Should we treat (some) animals as «marginal cases» in the application of the principle of respect?<sup>16</sup>

Or should we remove the limitation altogether? This creates a sort of paradox: if we have to respect animals and the environment, i.e., if we have to respect *everything*, is the principle still useful as a criterion for action? Can we make any distinction in the kind of respect that we, supposedly, owe to other living and non-living beings?

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12 R.L. Walker, *The Unfinished Business of Respect for Autonomy: Persons, Relationships, and Nonhuman Animals*, “Journal of Medicine and Philosophy” 45 (2020), pp. 521-539.

13 B. Williams, *The Human Prejudice*, in Id., *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2009.

14 P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Harper Collins, New York (NY) 2009 (1975); and Id. *In Defense of Animals*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985.

15 T. Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, University of California Press, Berkeley (CA) 1983; second ed. 2004.

16 Cfr. C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, cit., pp. 77-96 argues that the argument from marginal cases is seriously flawed: “A creature is not just a collection of properties, but a functional unity, whose parts and systems work together in keeping him alive and healthy in the particular way that is characteristic of his kind” (p. 83).

## 2. *Re-formulating the principle of respect*

I want to propose a different strategy, based on a reformulation of the principle in terms of *relations of power*. Instead of concentrating on the object of respect, I suggest focusing on the principle itself, clarifying its origin and its fundamental structure.

My thesis is that respect is the practical recognition of an (at least partially) independent power, which requires acting accordingly. More precisely, respect is the encounter between two or more powers, not necessarily of the same kind, in which every power takes action and creates a relation to the other powers according to its ability to interact. Autonomy is one such kind of power, and a very particular one; but it is not the only power that we, as agents, have and that we are confronted with, not even among rational agents. Our autonomy is embodied, and it is immersed in complex spatial, temporal, social and cultural relations affecting its expression. Respect takes different forms and contents according to the powers involved: it is essentially a relation, in which the powers confronting each other aim at attaining a normative status. As I will show, the perspective I am trying to articulate can be seen as an interpretation of the fundamental structure of respect in Kantian terms. But before showing that, it is necessary to further elaborate the definition of respect I have just offered.

Kant characterized respect as a feeling. It is the feeling aroused by the awareness of the moral law. This kind of emotive reaction is the effect of the authority of the moral law on inclinations. So, Kant says that respect is the only *practical* – as opposed to *pathological* – feeling, meaning that it is derived from the awareness of the rational source of morality.

There is no *antecedent* feeling in the subject that would be attuned to morality: that is impossible, since all feeling is sensible whereas the incentive of the moral disposition must be free from any sensible condition. Instead, sensible feeling, which underlies all our inclinations, is indeed the condition of that feeling we call respect, but the cause determining it lies in pure practical reason; and so this feeling, on account of its origin, cannot be called pathologically effected but must be called *practically effected*.<sup>17</sup>

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17 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), 5, p. 75; tr. by M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.

Kant maintains that respect humiliates self-love, making it clear, in an emotional way, that our destination as rational agents is not to be slave of inclinations:

Respect for the law is not the incentive to morality; instead it is morality itself subjectively considered as an incentive inasmuch as pure practical reason, by rejecting all the claims of self-love in opposition with its own, supplies authority to the law, which now alone has influence.<sup>18</sup>

So, the moral law has authority over the emotions. Yet, what is the source of this authority? Kant says that the awareness of the moral law is a fact of reason (*Faktum der Vernunft*), which means that its validity is self-evident upon reflection:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us).<sup>19</sup>

This does not mean that the moral law “grounds itself”, so to say. Kant only says that the *awareness* of the moral law is a fact, and the use of the uncommon word *Faktum* points to the idea that the moral law is a product of practical reason, a law of its functioning which is posed by practical reason itself.

Now, at this point we should remember that Kant says that the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom, and that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law.<sup>20</sup> This means that the ultimate source of the moral law is freedom. The awareness of the moral law implies that we admit that such a law can only be the product of autonomy, i.e., of freedom giving a law onto itself. In that sense, respect is the effect of freedom on emotions by way of the awareness of the moral law. Freedom is the only source of authority, for Kant. This explains why he refuses to recognize rights to animals and why the duties concerning them are indirect, being required only as an expression of a respectful attitude

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18 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 76.

19 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 31.

20 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 4n: “I only want to remark that where-as freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. For, had not the moral law *already* been distinctly thought in our reason, we should never consider ourselves justified in *assuming* such a thing as freedom (even though it is not self-contradictory). But were there no freedom, the moral law would *not be encountered* at all in ourselves.”



toward persons: those who treat animals badly are more likely to treat humans in the same way. An assumption, by the way, that is far from being empirically demonstrated.<sup>21</sup>

It is at this point that we should bring the structure of Kant's argument a bit further. Essentially, respect is the recognition of the authority of freedom as the source of the moral law. This authority derives from the power of freedom. This power is twofold.

A first dimension of this power is negative: Kant says that freedom is independent from the inclinations and from any further condition. Freedom is an ultimate power, subtracted from the laws of phenomena, since it is not determined by any natural law. This is not an empirical claim. It is a conclusion drawn from the premise that the law that we (as a fact of reason) are aware of as the law of rational action, i.e., the moral law ("So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law"),<sup>22</sup> cannot be a law of phenomena. It is a *practical* law. This means that it is a law for a will that is independent of the natural laws:

If no determining ground of the will other than that universal lawgiving form can serve as a law for it, such a will must be thought as altogether independent of the natural law of appearances in their relations to one another, namely the law of causality. But such independence is called *freedom* in the strictest, that is, in the transcendental, sense.<sup>23</sup>

This argument is based on the idea that the "*Will* is a kind of causality of living beings insofar as they are rational, and *freedom* would be that property of such causality that it can be efficient independently of alien causes *determining* it".<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that Kant says that the will is one kind of causality *among others*. It is the kind of causality owned by rational agents *as such*. But human rational agents are persons, and persons also have other kinds of causality: they are living beings, with a body and a presence, they move and nurture themselves and they cause events in the world just like all other living beings. Their difference is that they can act

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21 J. Skidmore, *Duties to Animals: The Failure of Kant's Moral Theory*, in "The Journal of Value Inquiry", 35, 2001, pp. 541-559.

22 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 30.

23 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 29.

24 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. by M. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998; corresponding to *KGS*, 4, p. 446.

under a law posed by their own autonomy, i.e., their ability to create laws for action. This is their supersensible dimension, meaning no more than a dimension that is not subsumed under the laws of phenomena. In general, for Kant, “supersensible nature, so far as we can make for ourselves a concept of it, is nothing other than *a nature under the autonomy of pure practical reason*”.<sup>25</sup> This is the negative meaning of freedom.

A second dimension of freedom as power is positive: freedom is not just an arbitrary power; it creates its own law. Freedom as autonomy is the ability of forming a law from a subjective maxim, which becomes the law of a moral order that is a level of reality made by actions. Freedom is unconditioned (*Unbedingte*) and self-regulating:

What, then, can freedom of the will be other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself? But the proposition, the will is in all its actions a law to itself, indicates only the principle, to act on no other maxim than that which can also have as object itself as a universal law.<sup>26</sup>

This positive dimension of freedom as a power is recognized as the ground of the moral law and as a characteristic of the kind of will that determines itself on its basis. This kind of will is autonomous, i.e., it is a power following its own law and is not under any other condition.

Now, if we characterize respect as the recognition of the (unconditioned) power of freedom, we find this fundamental structure: respect is an emotional response generated by the relation between freedom and sensibility, where freedom as an autonomous power causes, through the awareness of the moral law it creates, the feeling of deference and wonder that we call respect. So, we can say that, in general, respect is the emotional recognition of power; in particular, Kant holds that respect is the emotional effect of the awareness of the moral law generated by the power of freedom as autonomy. When we meet another person, we feel the power of her freedom confronting us: she can contrast our will in ways that we cannot control, because her freedom is an *independent* power that will always escape our dominion. As Kant says,

before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself *my spirit bows*, whether I want it or whether I do not and hold my head ever so high, that he may not overlook my superior position.<sup>27</sup>

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25 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 43.

26 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4, p. 447.

27 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5, p. 77.

In this passage, the feeling of respect is caused by the perception of the law operating as a ground of determination of the will (*Bestimmungsgrund des Willens*) in a person, and this is the power to which my spirit bows. *That person* is the power that faces me: I perceive a living being endowed with autonomy, therefore not only her autonomy, but her energy as a living being, the power of her life together with the power of her freedom.

We can go beyond Kant, here, in at least two ways. The first is by understanding respect not only as a feeling but as a principle as well. This is something many authors have already done.<sup>28</sup> It is not an awkward move, since the second formula of the categorical imperative can easily be interpreted as commanding respect for every person by not using anyone as a mere means. Present-day language has absorbed this meaning as part of the concept, and there is no need to restrict it exclusively to the feeling.

The second way of moving beyond Kant is understanding respect as the relation between powers mediated by emotions. Confronting another's power is an experience we very often have. We may experience fear, rage, challenge, but in general what we feel is respect, understood in a wide sense: we feel that we are facing a force that can resist us, and that therefore has potential authority over us. Freedom is at least this power of resistance against dominion. We cannot do what we want with that force. Furthermore, when we meet persons, we understand ourselves as having the same kind of authoritative force, therefore our claim to dominate has no basis: as autonomous agents, we are two identical powers confronting each other. In this perspective, respect is the feeling that the other has an independent power that can even be a threat to me. "Respecting an enemy" is not so much recognizing her humanity, but first of all recognizing that she has the power to win over me. I respect her because I recognize her power. And I oppose my power to hers so that I cannot be used or dominated. We can fight or we can reach an agreement, it depends on the circumstances.

### 3. *Different kinds of power*

Of course, we do not meet each other only as autonomous agents. We are embodied, we live in a certain context, and we exercise our freedom differently. While freedom as autonomy can be understood, in Kantian terms, as an all-or-nothing capacity, belonging to all human beings as such, the other powers that we have as living and social beings (strength, influence,

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28 See note 1.

position, finance) are unequal, and the relation of powers is uneven. This is why, in strictly Kantian terms, respect concerns only our *moral* identity, i.e., our identity as rational autonomous agents.

Yet, confronting each other involves all the different powers we have. We stand in front of each other as autonomous agents, but also as living beings. And, as such, we have some distinct powers: the powers of our body, the powers of life. These powers stand on a different level from the power of freedom. But they are powers nonetheless, and they have to be recognized as at least partially independent from us. Respecting these powers means recognizing their independence and the effect they may have on us no less than the effect that we may have on them.

Respecting means feeling and recognizing the power facing us. This is a feeling specifically different from fear or wonder, it is the emotional awareness of a presence that might have some authority over us, in the sense that this power has effects on our behaviour and can change our attitude while confronting it. We *take it into account*. And we know that there are things that we cannot do with it. When we confront ourselves with the power of other living beings or of nature, we know that they are an independent power and that if we do not recognize this, we risk being overcome, defeated, and destroyed.

The majority of other authors have not pursued this strategy. Christine Korsgaard admits that she is “somewhat tempted by such thoughts”. She says:

We do have normative responses to plants, for instance; a drooping plant in need of a drink seems to present us with a reason to water it; a sapling growing from what seems to be almost sheer rock makes us want to cheer it on. Is this because we cannot help animistically imagining that the plant experiences its good? Or is it perhaps because the shared condition of *life itself* elicits these responses? Could it even be that we have duties, not only to our fellow creatures, but to our fellow organisms, and to even our fellow entities?<sup>29</sup>

But she refrains from these thoughts, since she is “convinced that there is something special about the kind of good to which something is subject when it is a conscious being with a self”.<sup>30</sup> Granted, but does this imply that respect can only be connected to the recognition of a self? What seems to be missing in Korsgaard’s analysis is the idea that respect is a practical relation between powers. The powers involved can be different both in nature and in strength, but the essential structure of respect does not change.

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29 C. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures*, cit., p. 94.

30 *Ibid.*

Confronting each other, the powers define their relation in terms of possible conflict and/or recognition, so that every relation has a measure in the reciprocal action of each power on the other one.

Is there a normative rule in this relation between powers? My answer is yes, and that normative rule is respect. In this perspective, respect is both a feeling and a principle, and can be defined, in general, as the relation between practical powers, no matter what kind of entities these powers are embodied in (persons, animals, volcanoes, etc.). In sentient beings, respect as a feeling is the emotive perception of the strengths of the other: we perceive the force of the bear, the bear perceives we can be a danger to her; the enemy is strong, the allied is a resource, the friend is part of our strength. As living beings, we feel that the other's powers need to be recognized as such, and that we have to adjust our action to the relation with those powers. So, respect is the feeling of the independent power of the other.

Respect as a principle is of course meaningful only to rational agents. But it is clear that it is not only a principle *regarding* rational agents. Starting from the definition of respect as the relation between powers, the principle of respect – in general – can be formulated as follows: *so act that you recognize power, in yourself or in any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*. We have different powers: our autonomy is an end in itself for autonomous agents; but our life is also an end in itself for us as living beings and for all living beings. So, respecting another (non-autonomous) living being means taking into account that his/her/its life and its basic conditions are ends in themselves for that living being (and for us as living beings).

This implies two slightly different forms of respect. First, the recognition of the other as an independent source of power: this generates a kind of prudence somehow connected to a sort of admiration for the exhibition of that force in the other. We admire the tiger's strength at the same time that we are scared of it, and we act so that we take into account that, for her, her life and self-defense are ends in themselves. Second, respect here is also the recognition that her animal power is something that we share, although in a different form and measure. She wants to be alive and will use her muscles, her agility and her cunning at the extreme to stay alive. This is the same that we do while confronting her.

Now, of course we also have different forms of power, that animals do not have (freedom) or that they seem to have in a less expanded version (rationality, language, emotions). This puts us in an *asymmetrical* relation to them. When we confront our powers to theirs, we can choose to use our other abilities to defend ourselves and/or to dominate them.

Taking into account our autonomy and our other abilities (technology included), we are generally stronger than other animals, in the sense that we can almost always find a way to impose ourselves on them. Freedom and our kind of rationality give us an advantage over other animals, but this does not imply that we are always justified in dominating them. One thing is power, another is legitimacy. But, in general, autonomy can be considered as a kind of superior power: it gives us an advantage and it is also an unconditioned power: it creates its own law. So, there is indeed an asymmetry between our powers and those of other animals.

Now, is there a normative rule in this asymmetrical relation? Yes, and we might try to express it as follows: *always use your freedom in a way that recognizes the other powers at play in the situation*. These powers can be an end in itself for other animals, just like autonomy is an end in itself for us humans. The privilege accorded to our kind is granted only inasmuch as what we do protects our autonomy without needlessly reducing the other animals' powers to mere means. In some cases, we need to do that, in other cases we do not: it is our responsibility to offer good reasons for using our autonomy as a dominating power. Also, we have a responsibility for leaving open the possibility that other animals can pursue their ends without being unduly oppressed by humans and their behaviour. Causing the extinction of a species is something we can avoid, and it is up to us to protect it insofar as its existence is not a direct threat to our autonomy (which is hardly the case).

#### 4. *Different kinds of respect*

This is where the structure of respect can be extended beyond persons: if respect for persons is the recognition of freedom as an autonomous power that people have, respect for animals is the recognition of an independent power that living beings have; and respect for the natural environment is the recognition of the independent power that inanimate nature has. These are different levels of respect, since the first is respect between freedoms, the second is respect between living beings (that we also are), the third is respect between natural entities (that we also are).

There are two dimensions of respect here, as said before: 1) the recognition of the power confronting us and 2) the recognition that we *share* that same power with the other pole of the relationship. We are prudent when we recognize the strength in the other; we are empathic when we recognize that our power and hers are of the same kind in at least some respect, though we may have also further and different powers.

This implies that we can have duties concerning persons that are different from the duties we have, out of respect, concerning animals or the environment. We have a kind of power that other animals do not have, i.e., freedom; we and the other animals have a power that inanimate life does not have, i.e., life. So, when we are confronting another autonomous will, we have some kinds of duties; when we are confronting the powers of animal life, we have a different kind of duties; and we have yet another kind of duties when we are confronting the environment. Let us try to characterize them.

1) Respect for persons (as autonomous agents): they can never be used as mere means and must always be treated as ends in themselves. Duties deriving from this principle ground social and political ethics (what we owe to each other)<sup>31</sup> no less than individual ethics (what we owe to ourselves). The least we can do is to offer good reasons that can be understood and shared by all the autonomous agents involved in the situation. This means recognizing everyone's autonomy as an unconditioned, independent power having effective relevance for our normativity. Since this power is ultimate, unconditioned and capable of creating its own law, the appropriate form of respect is offering reasons to share as a common determining ground for decision. Naturally, this implies the absolute protection of each person's autonomy, and of the conditions of its practice, life included.

2) Respect for non-human animals (as living beings): they are ends in themselves as living beings; autonomy as a superior kind of power (the power to create its own law) has privilege only insofar as this is needed to protect itself and to make its effective exercise possible. Protecting the life and well-being of non-human animals is a responsibility of autonomous agents, who can take advantage of their autonomy only provided that they do not unduly sacrifice the other powers to which they themselves belong (life, existence). The powers of living beings are independent: they need to be recognized as sources of some authority, e.g., we have no right to slaughter them for mere fun. Along these lines, the duties deriving from this kind of respect include responsibility for the species, the duty of reducing the use of non-human animals to what is actually needed for exercising autonomy, the duty to care for animals depending on us for their survival and flourishing.

3) Respect for the environment (as nature): nature is a source of power, even in its inanimate form. This power is expressed in the laws of nature, and

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31 T. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1998; rev. ed. 2000.

it cannot create a law of its own. Therefore, its normative authority is inferior to that of autonomy. Yet, autonomy only exists in living beings that are part of nature. And even autonomous agents have to recognize that the power of nature is at least partially independent and uncontrollable by humans. It is a power of its own. So, the recognition of the value of nature as a source of power implies that we must have good reasons if we want to dominate or mould it for our purposes. These reasons are connected to life and autonomy as superior powers than mere existence, but this does not mean that nature can simply be used without a good reason. And a good reason is one that shows that certain uses are really necessary to protect life and autonomy.

These different kinds of respect are combined together. The priority among them, i.e., autonomy, life, existence, is based on the actual relations between these powers. But this priority is not such that the superior level of respect grants any behaviour toward the other levels. Each sphere of powers requires an appropriate form of respect and a consequent behaviour. So, we can protect autonomy, but the recognition of the authoritative power of life and existence requires that we do it inflicting the less possible damage to them, and that we recognize that those independent powers impose caution on us. So, prudence in dealing with animate and inanimate nature is also an expression of respect, while recognition that we have the powers of life and existence in common with those entities implies a kind of equality that is not the level of the equality of autonomy but nonetheless requires some respect.

If the strategy I proposed here works, we have enlarged the scope of the principle of respect without losing contact with the emotional side of it, i.e., its being a perception of an independent power that limits our excessive self-confidence and dominion. If we understand respect not only as the recognition of dignity and autonomy, but more generally as the recognition of an independent power, we obtain at least three results.

First, we have shed light on the formal structure that backs up both the emotional experience of respect and its normative value. Respect is a relation between powers, in which the recognition of the other's power elicits an emotive reaction and the adaptation of behaviour to a principle of not reducing it to a mere means.

Second, we have established a formula of respect that naturally includes humans, the other living beings and inanimate nature, but not at the same level as autonomous agents. The principle of morality remains, but differences are taken into account as differences in the kind of powers that we are facing. Authority comes from those powers, but in rather different ways and measures.



Third, we have given an account of how to accommodate common language, especially concerning the use of respect in expressions like respect for animals, for the environment, for the planet. We have a different sensibility to these issues from that of Kant and his contemporaries, and our moral theories must take into account the awareness we now have of the importance of living and inanimate beings.

There can be a lot to be specified in the application of this principle. But this strategy seems more promising than, on one side, depriving of direct respect all non-autonomous agents (as Kant does) and, on the other side, trying to include the other living beings among the number of autonomous agents. Korsgaard is right in claiming that our fellow creatures can be considered ends in themselves because there is something that is absolutely good for them. This Aristotelian correction of Kant's principle is indeed helpful. But respect is not about absolute good: it is a relation between powers and, in the Kantian framework, good comes after right. The right relation to another power is recognition and the definition of a rule of this relation. The absolute good of a living being is relevant to another being as far as it represents a practical – not a theoretical – pole of interaction. So, autonomous agents and other living beings can be ends in themselves *because* they have the power to pursue their ends and to face opposing powers. The rule, for autonomous agents, is to recognize that power, be prudent, reduce damage to the least and, when possible, promoting the development of those powers in an appropriate way.

Furthermore, and as a conclusion, respect as a normative relation between powers can handle these situations better than establishing rights. In fact, rights require stronger claims and are based on the recognition of a *status*. But actually, status reflects power, and it is established on the basis of the actual relations between powers. In this sense, respect is at the same time more realistic and more normative than rights. We do not need to recognize a status on some ontological or metaphysical basis. The real relations between entities (autonomous agents, living beings, natural objects) are the real *practical* foundation of any rights claim. Real powers create a status, which is to be understood as the condition generated by the balance of powers that constitute the normative capacity of an entity. Respect is therefore based on actual relations, and not on any *a priori* definition of the nature of things. Respect is practical, not metaphysical.



# RECOGNITION, GOOD LIFE, AND GOOD WORLD

Armando Manchisi

## *Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical analysis of the relationship between self-realization and social recognition on the basis of a view that I characterize as “pragmatist.” According to this view, an individual realizes herself to the extent that she acts for the sake of establishing rational and dynamic interactions with her natural and social environment. Focusing on the social sphere, I show that we can interpret such interactions as relations of mutual recognition between an individual, who thus receives the ontological and ethical status of personhood, and an environment, which thereby acquires the normative and institutional features of society. Insofar as interactions with the surrounding reality are constitutive of a person’s self-realization, and not mere conditions of possibility, I finally suggest that we conceive of the problem of human flourishing in terms not only of the “good life” but also of the “good world.”

*Keywords:* Self-Realization, Recognition, Pragmatism, Social Ontology, Personhood.

In short, the thing actually at stake in any serious deliberation is not a difference of quantity, but what kind of person one is to become, what sort of self is in the making, what kind of a world is making. (John Dewey)

## *1. Introduction: Self-Realization and Society*

It is a widely held idea that the more a society enables people to freely realize themselves and lead a good life, the more positively it can be judged; and likewise, as a consequence, the more a social order impedes people from developing themselves and flourishing, the more it must be criticized. However, this idea contains two issues that are not always adequately addressed.

The first concerns the very concept of *self-realization*. In contemporary philosophy, both Aristotelian and Marxist as well as liberal approaches have mostly presupposed the meaning of this concept.<sup>1</sup> There is undoubtedly a basic agreement on understanding this term as one of the major ways through which it is possible to address the problem of the *good life*. Since Socrates, a life is regarded as good, and therefore worth living, to the extent that a person realizes herself, i.e., pursues those ends that give value to her existence. Nevertheless, the philosophical debate (but the same is true also for psychology, sociology, economics and political theory) has made few steps beyond this assumption. This raises, therefore, a problem at the very heart of projects aimed at the elaboration of an ethics of the good life or a critical theory of society: without an adequate reflection on the concept of “self-realization,” it is not possible in fact to identify and evaluate the contexts that foster or impede human flourishing.

The second issue concerns the *relationship* between self-realization and society. This relationship is usually conceived of as a one-sided dynamic exercised by institutions on individuals, that is, in terms of social promotion or inhibition of the good life. Such a view, however, is not entirely compelling for two main reasons. First of all, it does not leave individuals any freedom beyond that allowed by the social order, assuming thereby that persons are passive towards the normative pressure exerted by institutions. Secondly, it ignores the *feedback effects* that, under normal circumstances, occur between society and individuals. By speaking of “feedback effects” I mean the fact that every norm established by institutions has consequences on citizens’ actions (for example, they may approve or get indignant) and these actions, in turn, affect the decisions of institutions (which may see their policies confirmed or rejected).

These remarks show that it is not possible to reduce the relationship between self-realization and society to a dynamic of one-sided conditioning. An effective tool for examining this problem, taking account of its complexity, is represented by the notion of *recognition*, which allows us to see a reciprocal relationship between individuals’ claims to pursue their valuable ends and the need of institutional structures to maintain social unity and ensure their own existence.

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1 There are some prominent exceptions, such as the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum; see e.g. Sen 1999. The topic has also been investigated by contemporary virtue ethics, especially in its Aristotelian version; see e.g. Annas 2011, ch. 7-9. Particularly important for a clarification of the *concept* of “self-realization” are Elster 1986, pp. 99-110; Gewirth 1998, ch. 1; Schlette 2013, part 2.

Given these considerations, the aim of this paper is to provide a philosophical analysis of the relationship between self-realization and social recognition. In order to do so, I proceed as follows: (2) I first examine the most common view of self-realization, which I call “expressivist”; (3) after criticizing its assumptions, I take into consideration a possible alternative, which I characterize as “pragmatist”; (4) I then turn to the social relevance of self-realization, focusing in particular on the concept of “recognition”; in light of this analysis, (5) I finally suggest the need to conceive of human flourishing not only in terms of the “good life” but also of the “good world.”

## 2. *What is Self-Realization? The Expressivist View*

### 2.1. *Self-Realization as Self-Expression*

The most common way, not only in philosophy, to understand self-realization is to consider it as the capacity of a human being to *express* herself, that is, to actualize her inner potential ( $P$ ). According to this perspective – which we can therefore call *expressivist*<sup>2</sup> – self-realization refers to a process of manifestation and development of  $P$ , i.e., those characteristics and abilities that distinguish a human being or a person and that she therefore has reason to value. These characteristics and abilities are intended as an individual’s specific properties that must be given “voice,” so to speak. Expression is therefore a passage from potentiality to actuality.<sup>3</sup>

The most relevant example of this view is Aristotelian ethics. As is well known, Aristotle argues that the ultimate goal of our actions, which repre-

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2 I take this term from Taylor 1989, ch. 21, but I use it with a slightly different meaning. On these topics see also Taylor 1991.

3 The way in which this potentiality is conceived allows us to distinguish between a *universalist* and an *individualist* variant of expressivism. The former understands self-realization as the process through which a human being  $x$  realizes her essence or universal nature, that is, the property (or set of properties)  $P_U$  that makes a certain individual a member of the human kind. In the universalist conception, therefore,  $x$  realizes herself to the extent that she expresses  $P_U$ . The individualist variant understands self-realization as the process through which a human being  $x$  expresses her specificity, i.e., that quality (or set of qualities)  $P_I$  that characterizes her in a peculiar way, making her unique and irreducible to other human beings. Since it is not relevant to the purposes of this paper, I will not explore this distinction further.

sents for us the “highest good,” is happiness (*eudaimonia*). This consists in the fulfillment by the human being of her specific function (*ergon*), namely, of that property *P* that characterizes her in an essential way. This function is notoriously identified by Aristotle as *logos*, that is, the human capacity to think, grasp meanings, and communicate them. *Logos* refers exactly to that fundamental property *P* that is common to all human beings as such and that allows us to distinguish them, for example, from non-human animals. Given this premise, therefore, the ultimate goal of self-realization – happiness – can only consist, for Aristotle, in the “activity of soul which follows or implies reason,” (*NE*, 1098a 7-8) that is, in a life led by the full exercise and development of rationality.

## 2.2. *Genesis and Effects: Two Problems of Expressivism*

The expressivist view represents the most common and familiar way of conceiving of human self-realization, that is, as an expression of inner potential. This perspective, however, has limits that undermine its internal coherence. In particular, these limits concern the relationship between individuals and their *environment*, namely, that complex of natural and social conditions into which human beings are inserted and with which they constantly interact. According to the expressivist view, the realization of the property (or set of properties) *P* is structured in the form of a state transition from the interiority of an individual *x* to her exteriority, that is, from a time  $t_1$ , in which *x* possesses *P* internally but does not manifest it externally, to a time  $t_2$ , in which *x* possesses *P* and manifests it externally. With respect to this apparently trivial framework, (at least) two objections can be raised, both concerning *x*'s relationship with her environment: in one case, *x* is isolated from the context present at  $t_1$ ; in the other, *x* is isolated from the context present at  $t_2$ .

a) The first problem arises from the fact that the expressivist view seems to abstract *x* from the complex of external conditions present in  $t_1$ , thus assuming the existence of *P* as a context-free datum. In this way, expressivism does not seem to provide a sufficient explanation of the *genesis* of potential properties, i.e., of the role that natural and social factors play in the initial determination of the qualities of *x*, and therefore of the reasons that make certain properties constitutive of *x*, while others are merely contingent.

This is not to say, of course, that the expressivist view does not contemplate the influence of external factors on human self-realization. In Aristotle, for example, a city ruled by a bad government can hinder the

full development of the rational faculty. The problem with expressivism, however, is that it regards the very *existence* of potentialities as independent of external factors. In other words, given its ontological premises, the expressivist view admits an influence of the environment exclusively on the *transition* from potentiality to actuality (i.e., on the process of self-realization), but not on the definition of potentiality as such (i.e., on whether the human being is, for example, a rational animal).<sup>4</sup>

b) The second problem which, in my opinion, undermines the coherence of the expressivist view concerns the role  $x$  plays in affecting the external conditions present in  $t_2$ . A close look at the processes of self-realization should acknowledge that it is not only environmental factors that influence the development of a human being, but that it is also this development that influences the environment in which the human being is located. Expressivism does not seem to properly consider the *effects* of self-realization, i.e., the consequences that  $P$ 's transition from potentiality to actuality has on the natural and social conditions in which  $x$  is situated. The problem, however, is that the development of certain qualities does not leave the world as it was before such development. Taking an example from the natural world, we can think of the fact that it is not only the quality of the soil, the quantity of precipitation and the exposure to the sun that influence the acorn, allowing it to take root in the ground and become an oak tree, but it is the very development of the acorn that modifies the surrounding landscape, to the extent that, for example, its oak roots, by lengthening, change the composition of the soil, or its branches, by strengthening, host bird nests.

Conceiving of self-realization as the mere transition from a time  $t_1$ , in which  $x$  possesses certain qualities but does not manifest them, to a time  $t_2$ , in which  $x$  manifests these qualities, ends up neglecting the role played by the environment both as the “starting point” of human flourishing and as its “ending point.” Natural and social conditions are taken into account by expressivism only insofar as they resist or facilitate the process of self-realization; their role in determining the qualities of  $x$  and the effects that the development of these qualities has on them (e.g., the impact on natural ecosystems or social balances) is ignored. In other words, the expressivist view upholds an exclusively *instrumental* conception of the external world.

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4 On the complexities related to the concept of “potentiality” see Engelhard, Quante 2018.

### 3. What is Self-Realization? The Pragmatist Alternative

In light of these conclusions, I would now like to outline a possible alternative to expressivism – an alternative that understands environmental conditions as a *constitutive*, rather than instrumental, element of human self-realization. On this proposal, it is not a person’s inner potential that determines the value of the ends toward which she must steer her life, but her ability to *interact in a rational and dynamic way with her environment*. It is important to focus first on the two key concepts of this definition, namely *environment* and *interaction*.

#### 3.1. The Concept of “Environment”

By “environment” I mean, as we have already partly seen, the complex of natural and social conditions in which a human being is “ontologically embedded,” so to speak, and on which both her subsistence and her development depend. Among the many philosophers who have addressed the concept of “environment,” the one who comes closest to what I have in mind is John Dewey, who writes:

Human nature exists and operates in an environment. And it is not “in” that environment as coins are in a box, but as a plant is in the sunlight and soil. It is of them, continuous with their energies, dependent upon their support, capable of increase only as it utilizes them, and as it gradually rebuilds from their crude indifference an environment genially civilized (Dewey 1983, p. 204).

Thus understood, the environment is not simply a “background” against which human beings stand out, but the set of factors that together define the human form of life, in both its biological basis and its moral development. This means, as a result, that it is not possible to adequately understand a human being (at least from a philosophical point of view) if we do not conceive of her within her environment, that is, as a contextualized subject: the natural and social conditions in which she acts are not an external limit, but an integral part of her constitution. Hence, an individual does not determine herself regardless of her relationships with the world, but only *because* of them. A human being is already committed to interacting with things and with other individuals: these relationships do not arise *after* she has determined herself, but rather are an essential component of her. A person, therefore, can authentically flourish only by passing through the world and interacting



with other persons. Thus, the relationship with the environment is, in this perspective, *constitutive* of personal identity.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2. *The Dynamics of Interaction*

The second key term in the view I am outlining is “interaction.” Following another pragmatist philosopher, George Herbert Mead, I use this term to denote the relationship of reciprocity (which does not necessarily mean “symmetry”) between an individual and her environment. Speaking of “interaction” means referring to a dynamic of mutual adaptation between an entity  $x$  and her environment  $E$ . In this sense, the relationship between  $x$  and  $E$  implies that it is not only  $E$  that adapts to the action of  $x$ , but that it is also  $x$  that adapts to the configuration of  $E$ . Consequently, if  $x_1$  acts in the time  $t_1$  modifying  $E_1$ , what will arise in  $t_2$  are not  $x_1$  and  $E_2$ , but  $x_2$  and  $E_2$ . In this respect, every action is nothing but the “adjustive response” to an external solicitation, just as in fencing – Mead explains – the parry is nothing but “an interpretation of the thrust” (Mead 1934, p. 78).

The relationship between the individual and the environment is therefore neither a contraposition nor a simple juxtaposition, but a peculiar dynamic of reciprocal action. Therefore, to say that human self-realization consists in a person’s ability to “interact in a rational and dynamic way” with her environment means that, in order to successfully realize herself, the person must be able, on the one hand, to calibrate her own forces on the basis of the existing state of things and, on the other, to modify this state of things in order to improve it.

It is hence possible to differentiate between two phases of interaction: in the first one, it is  $x$  that adapts to  $E$ , by adjusting her actions to the natural and social conditions in which she is situated (for example, if I am unhappy with the current legislation in my country regarding LGBTIQ rights, I can gather information and evaluate the most effective means at my disposal to change this state of affairs); in the second phase it is instead  $E$  that adapts to  $x$ , responding to her drive for realization (my attempt may succeed: the legislation changes, granting more rights to LGBTIQ people and thus allowing me to live in a society that I consider more dignified and in which I have more opportunities to realize myself; or my attempt may fail: the legislation does not change, but I have learned how to reset my strategy of action in order to try again to change things; in the meantime, having involved other people or institutions in my cause, I have still influenced their civic conscience. In

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5 For a development of this perspective, see Quante 2018.

both cases, therefore, my attempt to pursue my valuable ends has produced an alteration in the structure of my environment, although in the first case this environment has been responsive to my solicitation, while in the second case it has resisted). *X*'s attempt will engender new conditions to which she can adapt herself, recalibrating the direction of her own development. These two phases imply each other: only if the mutual influence between a person and her environment are sufficiently rational and dynamic will the interaction be truly successful, allowing the individual to realize herself.

These clarifications are also important in order not to misinterpret the notion of "adaptation" used above. The fact that our action must adapt to the environment does not mean that it must preserve the existing state of affairs. On the contrary, the ability to calibrate the action on the actual configuration of reality, rather than on the basis of mere abstractions, is a necessary condition for its improvement: a successful action is determined as much by a correct assessment of its strengths as by an adequate consideration of the factors that may hinder or facilitate it. An appropriate adaptive response is therefore essential to modifying reality and ensuring better conditions for one's own as well as others' future actions.

In the *pragmatist* (or interactionist) view I am outlining, then, to realize oneself means to establish successful relationships with one's natural and social environment, that is, to determine the world in order to feel "at home" in it. The purpose of this is not instrumental (the world as a means to self-realization), since, as we have already seen, the environment is not an external limitation, but an essential component of a person's identity.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, as Mead has well explained:

The organism [i.e., the human being], then, is in a sense *responsible* for its environment. And since organism and environment determine each other and are mutually dependent for their existence, it follows that the life-process, to be adequately understood, must be considered in terms of their interrelations (Mead 1934, p. 130; my emphasis).

It is then possible to state that, in the pragmatist view, a human being's self-realization does not occur only "in" the world, but also "with" the world. In this way, the pursuit of the good life is linked not to the ability to express inner potentialities, as in expressivism, but to the possibility of making a good *world*.<sup>7</sup>

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6 This point is very well analyzed by Jaeggi 2014, ch. 10.

7 On the ethical notion of the "good world" cf. Siep 2004. On the sociological front, Hartmut Rosa developed the idea that a good life consists of a relationship

#### 4. *Recognition as the Form of Social Interaction*

Before I come back to the concept of the “good world,” I would like to focus in more detail on the relationship between self-realization and the social environment. In the previous paragraph I defined self-realization as the rational and dynamic interaction of a person with her environment. Given the initial abstractness of this definition, I have tried to clarify the main concepts it contains, trying to show in particular that the interaction I am talking about is not a dynamic of mere passive adaptation of the human being to the environment, but a particular form of *action*. This means that the individual, in addition to being subjected to the pressure of surrounding reality, also actively influences that reality while pursuing her valuable ends. In order to be truly productive of self-realization, this influence must be structured rationally and dynamically: it must be *rational*, since, to be successful, the action must be calibrated in a thoughtful and well-informed way on the actual configuration of the environment (rather than on imaginary projections or abstract ideals); and it must be *dynamic*, since it must ensure that the environment is responsive to its solicitation.

In my opinion, an appropriate way to understand the social form of the interaction, conceived in this way, is to interpret it as *recognition*. Therefore, I would like now to examine this concept, focusing in particular on those which I hold as the two main dimensions it contains, namely the *ontological* dimension and the *ethical* dimension.<sup>8</sup> This analysis should help clarify not only the nature of social interaction as such, but also and above all the structure of human self-realization.

##### 4.1. *The Ontological Dimension of Recognition*

Recognition has an ontological dimension insofar as it is *constitutive* of social interaction and of the entities involved in it. From this point of view, it therefore fulfills two interrelated functions:

a) it makes social interaction the kind of relation it is, i.e., a *relation of mutual recognition*, and thus distinguishes it from other kinds of relations (e.g., dynamics of biological adaptation);

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of “resonance” with reality, meaning a relationship “in which subject and world are mutually affected and transformed”; for Rosa, resonance “is not an echo, but a responsive relationship, requiring that both sides speak with their own voices” (Rosa 2019, p. 174).

8 I take this distinction from Ikäheimo 2010.

b) it makes individuals and the environment that interact entities of a particular kind, which we hence call, respectively, *persons* and *societies*, and thus distinguishes them from entities of other kinds (e.g., non-human animals or the environment understood as natural habitat).

I try to address these two functions separately.

a) The claim that recognition makes social interaction the kind of relation it is implies that there are many forms of relationship and that social interaction is only one among them. This presupposes, accordingly, that not all relationships are *interactions*, nor are all interactions *social* interactions. On the one hand, there are relations which do not consist in a mutual adaptation and which are therefore not interactions as defined above (see § 3.2); a case of non-interactive relation is, for example, the distance between me and the planet Saturn: it is a relation, insofar as it constitutes a link between two objects; but it is not an interaction, since it does not consist in a reciprocal action of any kind. On the other hand, there are interactions that do not have a social scope, meaning that they do not consist of relationships of mutual adaptation between a person and a society; when I walk in a field, for example, I am interacting with it, since the soil adapts to the pressure of my body just as my body adapts to the composition of the soil. This interaction is between me as a physical organism, and not as a person (in the technical sense of this term, to which I will return shortly), and a natural environment.

On the basis of these distinctions, it is then possible to state that a relation consists ontologically in a social interaction, properly speaking, insofar as it is configured as a relation of mutual adaptation between a person and a society, that is, as a *recognitive* interaction. By defining recognition in this way, we thus attribute to it the characteristics of interaction mentioned above, namely, rationality and dynamism: an interaction is properly recognitive only if the two poles – the person and the society – relate to each other in an adequately *trained* way, and only if they are mutually *responsive*.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand what this means we can use an example. Consider a relationship of misrecognition between an employee and her boss, due to the fact that, on the one hand, he constantly underestimates her and treats her as a factotum at his disposal; on the other hand, she harbors a strong resentment towards him, due precisely to the feeling of being treated

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9 See in this regard Laitinen 2002.

unfairly. Focusing on the manager's behavior, we can point to two main aspects that cause the lack of recognition. The first has to do with his inability to recognize the employee's skills and commitment in the same way that an illiterate person fails to understand the meaning of a written text; the second aspect concerns, as a partial consequence of the first, the boss's inability to adequately respond to the employee's behavior and therefore to treat her with the esteem and respect she deserves.

b) Recognition also fulfills a second ontological function, which in this case concerns not the relation but the *relata*. I have already stated that not all interactions are social interactions; the constitutive nature of interaction, however, makes it so that if it changes, the elements it links together will also somehow change. This means that the concepts of "individual" and "environment" must be specified according to the kind of interaction they involve or, in the likely case where they simultaneously involve interactions of more than one kind, according to the kind of interaction on which we focus. Generally speaking, we can then use the terms "organism" and "nature" in the context of natural interactions (e.g., chemical or ethological) and the terms "person" and "society" in the context of social interactions.

As noted above, however, the use of different terms reflects different entities. This means, consequently, that talking about the "human organism" is not the same as talking about a *person*. As an example, just consider the fact that infants or people in a vegetative state are often not accorded the (legal) status of personhood; and on the other hand, we can imagine entities from other planets, and therefore not belonging to the species *Homo sapiens*, to which personhood could be legitimately ascribed. I do not intend to go into the details of the debate on personal identity; here it is sufficient to claim that, in the pragmatist view I am sketching, personhood has a social character, which means that it consists in a specific ontological status that depends neither on biological constitution nor on individual psychology, but on interactions of recognition.<sup>10</sup>

The same is also true for *society*, which cannot be ontologically reduced to the natural environment. Recognitive interactions in fact determine the fabric of the social environment, making it something qualitatively different from a simple aggregate of human beings; this is the reason why even a large group of highly organized individuals driven by common values, as is the case, for example, in a political demonstra-

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10 See on this Quante 2018, ch. 2. Cf. also Ikäheimo 2007.

tion or in the stands of a soccer stadium, cannot be properly understood as society. To the extent that society means the complex of rational and responsive conditions with which persons interact, it is a peculiar kind of environment.<sup>11</sup>

This characterization should not be understood as a defense of an ontological dualism between the natural dimension and the social (or cultural) dimension. On the contrary, it aims to establish a continuity and mutual implication between them: on the one hand, the configuration of a society (also) depends on its “natural basis,” namely, on the organisms and material structures that compose it (e.g., certain geographical conditions); on the other hand, this “natural basis” can be shaped by the social environment (as is the case, for instance, when education modifies the constitution of a person). Recognitive interactions themselves are symbolic, and therefore cultural, mediations of natural elements insofar as, for example, they transform sounds and gestures into words and actions endowed with socially shared meanings, and thereby enable mutual understanding between persons. Recognition thus presupposes the natural dimension, e.g., the presence of sense organs, though it is not reducible to it (as is the case with the causal response to a stimulus). This point can be somehow summarized through the concept of *second nature*, which here means both that human nature is constitutively (though not exclusively) social, and that society is a natural result of human interaction.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.2. *The Ethical Dimension of Recognition*

Recognition determines not only the character of the entities and relationships involved in social interaction, but also their *quality*; this means that it has an *ethical* as well as an ontological dimension. In this regard, recognition is crucial for two interrelated issues:

- a) for the definition of the goodness of *persons'* lives;
- b) for the definition of the goodness of *society's* development.

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11 For a defense of an interactionist social ontology, see Frega 2018. On the role of recognition in determining the fabric of (modern) society, Honneth 2014 is undoubtedly crucial.

12 This seems to me to be also the core thesis of Dewey's naturalism. For a powerful contemporary development of the idea that the notions of “nature” and “culture” depend on the different ways in which humans' relationship to their environment is understood, see the anthropological study by Descola 2013.

I proceed to examine both in more detail.

a) How can appropriately recognizing interactions make our lives as persons *better*? This concerns first of all the acknowledgement that our individual existence and agency are constitutively bound up with the existence and agency of others. A long tradition, ranging from Descartes to Kant up to Rawls, has conceived of persons as “monological” structures, that is, as entities that constitute themselves independently of their encounters with the world; in this way, the subject privately establishes her own identity and values, and only later does she face reality and associate or clash with other subjects. In this conception, the other person is hence primarily a *limitation* on my attempt to pursue my valuable ends and my self-realization.

As has already been argued (see § 3.1), the pragmatist view reverses this conception. From an ethical point of view, this means not only that it is “better” or “easier” for a person to achieve her ends if helped by other persons, but also and above all that the existence and contribution of others are constitutive of the determination of these ends and their specific value. In other words, I cannot define who I am and what really matters to me without entering into relationships of social interaction. This is important both on the *psychological* level, insofar as recognition produces the self-esteem, respect, and trust in others necessary to freely set my life plans, and on the *intersubjective* level, insofar as it generates bonds of solidarity and cooperation that enable me to implement those plans in society.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore crucial for my self-realization that others recognize me as a person, that is, as an individual capable of sustaining rational and dynamic interactions (and not as a mere object, a lower organism, a non-responsible subject, etc.), and that I myself recognize them as persons. It is in this regard that it is possible to claim that adequate recognitive interactions are constitutive of a good life.

b) The fact that the flourishing of a person is tied in an essential way to her interaction with society leads us to take recognition as a criterion for evaluating the quality of a social order as well. It is therefore possible to consider the goodness of a society, its institutions and its normative structure, on the basis of its ability to establish successful interactions with the persons who inhabit it. This means that the more a society takes the form of

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13 These issues have been extensively investigated by Honneth 1996.

an environment that is rationally responsive to the claims for recognition of its citizens, both as individuals and as groups or collectivity, the more this society can be judged positively. The terms “responsive” and “rational” stand here for two fundamental aspects.<sup>14</sup>

First, a social environment is *responsive* insofar as it is capable not only of acknowledging people’s normative demands, for example the demands for recognition raised by ethnic minorities, religious communities or trade unions, but also and above all of “incorporating” these demands into its own social fabric. In this way, a society is good only if it is not perceived by the people who compose it as an extraneous dimension to which they strive to join. That is, an environment is good when it respects people rather than humiliates them, is one to which they feel they belong and contribute, and is structured by values and norms which individuals freely share.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, a social environment is *rational* insofar as it regards recognitive interactions as public dynamics and as revisable in light of well-justified criticism. This is an important point: it is indeed possible to imagine a totalitarian society in which all its citizens fully recognize themselves and feel perfectly “at home,” either because they really share its ideals or because, after a strong propaganda campaign, they only believe they share these ideals. We must then ask: what separates such an organic society from an *actually* good social environment?<sup>16</sup> A key distinguishing criterion lies precisely in the possibility of considering the interactions of recognition, and the normative claims embedded in them, as practices endowed with a rational content that can always enter the so-called “game of giving and asking for reasons”<sup>17</sup>: they can be made the subject of public discussion and can be appropriately rectified in light of justified criticism, new observations, or new arguments. In this way, therefore, recognition does not produce a homogeneous social mixture, as is the case in a totalitarian society. To use the terminology of mechanics, we can say that a good society, in the pragmatist meaning, does not aim at a “static equilibrium” that neutralizes any tension, but rather at a “dynamic equilibrium” that develops precisely because of the different normative claims embedded in persons’ instances of self-realization.

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14 Cf. Laitinen 2003.

15 Cf. Taylor 1992. On the importance that society does not humiliate persons see Margalit 1996.

16 See Rosa 2019, ch. VII.3 more extensively on this question.

17 Cf. Brandom 1994.



### 5. *Concluding Remarks: the Good Life and the Good World*

In this contribution I have tried to explore the concept of “self-realization” on the basis of a philosophical view that I characterized as “pragmatist.” According to this view, an individual realizes herself to the extent that she acts in order to establish appropriately rational and dynamic interactions with her natural and social environment. Focusing on the social sphere, I tried to show that we can interpret such interactions as relations of mutual recognition between an individual, who thus receives the ontological and ethical status of personhood, and an environment, which thereby acquires the normative and institutional features of society.

These conclusions should have helped clarify two main issues. The first is that adequate recognitive interactions are *constitutive* of the good life; namely, they are not mere conditions of possibility that a person or a society must provide in order to facilitate the pursuit of autonomously determined valuable ends and thus self-realization. In the pragmatist view I have sketched, the good life *consists*, on the social level,<sup>18</sup> in adequately rational and dynamic relations of mutual recognition (in the sense of these terms defined above).

The second issue concerns the fact that society is not to be understood, according to this view, as a mere set of “external” factors that can allow or block human flourishing, but rather as an essential component of it. This means that a good life can be truly achieved to the extent that it is not only the person who develops certain qualities or pursues certain valuable ends, but also the social world with which she interacts that flourishes.

These conclusions stand in opposition to the common view that understands self-realization as a “narcissistic” activity: to realize *myself*, it is argued, I must make myself the object of my care and attention, cultivate my interiority and thereby ensure that my potential is authentically expressed, that is, without suffering interference and distortion. Such a view, however, is based on the assumption that my identity – meaning the answer to the question “who am I?” – is somehow encapsulated within me. Given this idea, the outside world can, in the most favorable of circumstances, only help me realize this potential, or at least not obstruct me.

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18 This specification is crucial, since full self-realization also involves the natural level of human life (e.g., an individual’s physical endowment or state of health). On this issue, which I do not address in the present contribution, see Manchisi 2021.

In the alternative I have proposed, a person's identity is not defined independently or even in spite of the world, but rather precisely through it. It is the network of my interactions that determines who I am and what matters to me. This does not mean that I am merely a passive subject under the pressure exerted by reality: on the contrary, since interaction is a relationship of reciprocal action, I can "make the best of what I am" only if I make the *world* better. Self-realization must therefore be understood as a process not of introflection but of extroflection, that is, as a commitment to *act* in order to make a good world.

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# DEPATHOLOGISING RECOGNITION: ETHICAL SCAFFOLDING, OPENNESS TO INDETERMINACY, AND DIACHRONICITY

Silvia Piersara

## *Abstract*

Recognition can serve as a moral principle, directed at understanding and promoting the human capacity to criticise and transform frames of signification and normativity. For it to be so directed, recognition should be enforced and scaffolded by other principles with which cooperation within moral reasoning can be established. Taking my cue from several of Axel Honneth's reflections, I argue for an intersection of recognition and autonomy that leaves room for indeterminacy and diachronicity. First, I discuss the possibility of regarding recognitional phenomena as being non-immediate; second, I intersect the dynamics of recognition with those of autonomy by showing that recognition should be scaffolded by a precise definition of 'autonomy'; third, I propose leaving recognition undetermined and undefined so that the human capacity to criticise, create, and respond to change can be valued. Being recognised as autonomous is thus equivalent to being deemed capable of co-authoring one's own life and its meanings.

*Keywords:* Pathologies of recognition, Autonomy, Indeterminacy, Diachronicity.

## *1. Recognition: Remedy or Poison?*

As the first step of this contribution, I attempt to analyse recognitional dynamics by referring to a form of naturalisation: the health–pathology model. Some clarification is needed before reconstructing the link between the health–pathology model, the theory of recognition, and issues concerning naturalisation. My starting point is that interpreting recognitional phenomena as natural is not problematic per se. However, these patterns become invisible when they are assimilated as natural to such an extent that they become essentially immediate. In such a case, recognition operates more as a poison than as a remedy for moral life. The analysis of society in terms of social pathology, which can be traced back to the Frankfurt School, has recently focused on the pathologies of recognition

thanks to the work of Axel Honneth, which has sparked a huge debate that has only increased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This model has many resources, as expected, but it also has several limitations that elucidate the extent to which relations of recognition can be considered immediately natural.

The classification of suffering in terms of social pathology has the merit of conceptualising the ethical life of the individual as unavoidably entangled with society, as well as acknowledging that the material and symbolic aspects of human life are intertwined. The social dimension is not an option for ethical life; rather, it is the condition thereof. The problem with the semantics of pathologies is that, despite the varied nuances, it gives the impression that it would function naturally or be easily recovered, and that there is no room for a critical distance or for a critical commitment among all the actors involved to construct a definition of a life worth living. Far from denying or discussing a natural component in our common life, the peculiarity of humanity as such is that it can deliberately and reflectively endorse or deny – at least in part – what seems natural and assume it to be a form of normative guidance. Indeed, the idea of an agreement concerning the values to be promoted in the processes of recognition – which seems to be presupposed in the struggles for recognition – conflicts with a diagnostic approach that appears to identify, once and for all, the safe and appropriate mechanisms by which a society should function.

The image of pathologies applied to society is considered either literally or metaphorically: In the first case, society is seen as akin to an organism whose biological rules are immediately normatively binding; in the second case, a pathology represents a deviation from the ideal that runs the risk of being immutably fixed. Honneth's conception of social pathologies has long been analysed with a focus on its connection with recogni-

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1 Some international journals have recently devoted special issues to the topic of social pathologies, focusing on Axel Honneth's revival of the theme. See the contributions of Freyenhagen and Schaub in "Critical Horizons", 16, 2, 2015, a special issue devoted to Honneth's *The Freedom's Right*; "European Journal of Social Theory", 22, 1, 2019, which contains at least three different taxonomies of social pathology (see N. Harris, *Recovering the Critical Potential of Social Pathologies Diagnosis*; A. Laitinen, A. Särkelä, *Four Conceptions of Social Pathology*; O. Hirvonen, J. Pennanen, *Populism as a Pathological Form of Politics of Recognition*); "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 28, 2018, Special Issue Conference Edition: *Critical Theory and the Concept of Social Pathology*. Here I am interested in social pathologies to the extent that they intersect with the topic of recognition.

tion. A brief account of this debate is useful here.<sup>2</sup> Finnish authors such as Hirvonen, Laitinen, Ikäheimo, and Särkelä emblematically analyse the connection between Honneth's concept of social pathology and his theory of recognition. They do not criticise the possibility of using the concept of pathology in critical social theory; on the contrary, they find it to be a useful tool. Moreover, they support Honneth's idea that social pathologies are the outcome of the distorted relations of recognition. What they discuss is Honneth's interpretation of that concept, in an attempt to accentuate the role of self-realisation and to deepen a socio-ontological perspective in the definition of recognitional social pathologies.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, Laitinen and Ikäheimo problematise Zurn's interpretation of social pathologies as second-order disorders explicitly endorsed by Honneth<sup>4</sup> (I will come back to this interpretation below.) On the other hand, Hirvonen<sup>5</sup> and Särkelä criticise the second concept of social pathologies as it emerges in Honneth's writings, claiming that it is based on an organicist view of society. Organicism, so their argument goes, considers the pathological social mechanisms that impede the reproduction of society as a whole, but even the reproduction of society can be a source of social pathologies. Upon closer examination, Särkelä in particular highlights that social pathologies emerge when an excess of stasis or an excess of turbulent change prevails. Therefore, a balance between these two forces should be found in order to maintain social evolution and development.<sup>6</sup>

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2 For a recent and exhaustive discussion of the state of the art of Finnish contributions to this topic, see C. Piroddi, *Pathologies of Society and Social Philosophy: New Perspectives from Finland*, in "Distinktion: A Journal of Social Theory", 22, 1, 2021, pp. 60-82. Here, I follow his path in reconstructing the Finnish interpretation of Honneth's concept of social pathology. See also P. Verovšek, *Social Criticism as Medical Diagnosis? On the Role of Social Pathology and Crisis within Critical Theory*, in "Thesis Eleven", 155, 1, 2019, pp. 109-126.

3 This point is clearly explained by C. Piroddi, *Pathologies of Society*, cit., p. 68.

4 See A. Honneth, *The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept*, in "Social Research", 81, 3, 2014, pp. 683-703; A. Laitinen, *Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 44-65; H. Ikäheimo, *Conceptualizing Causes for Lack of Recognition: Capacities, Costs and Understanding*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 25-42.

5 See O. Hirvonen, *Pathologies of Collective Recognition*, in "Studies in Social and Political Thought", 25, 2, 2015, pp. 210-226.

6 See A. Särkelä, *Degeneration of Associated Life: Dewey's Naturalism about Social Criticism*, in "Transactions of Charles S. Peirce Society", 53, 1, 2017, pp. 107-126.

Moreover, Särkelä and Laitinen have recently referred to another double-sidedness in Honneth's conception of social pathologies by pointing out that they range from the normativism of his earlier writings to the naturalism, referred to as 'organicism', of his most recent interventions on this topic. Instead, they propose a kind of naturalism that equates society to a living process, rather than a substance.<sup>7</sup> I would term such naturalism a 'soft' version. However, my point here is that, even if it is corrected, as some Finnish thinkers attempt to do, the image of social pathologies as the outcome of processes or relations of (mis)recognition runs the risk of being considered something that happens because of its own laws that are not (or are only partly) modifiable, as it clearly emerges from the evolutionary consideration of the development of society about which Särkelä refers to the perceptive fabric of recognition pointed out by Laitinen.<sup>8</sup> What would deserve further discussion is their consideration of recognition as something that not only calls for action, negotiation, and clash but can also be traced back to natural mechanisms or reactions to objective qualities. Moreover, according to this viewpoint, patterns of interpersonal recognition literally build society, and this data cannot be changed. I follow the line of thought opened by the abovementioned Finnish thinkers since it seems to me to be consistent with Honneth's position. For this reason, I discuss the idea of social pathology as it emerges from Honneth and that those thinkers partly support, to the extent that they endorse a kind of naturalism. Depathologising recognition will thus mean partly denaturalising and denormalising<sup>9</sup> it at all levels, from the intra-individual level to the interpersonal, social, and institutional levels.

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7 See A. Laitinen, A. Särkelä, *Between Normativism and Naturalism: Honneth on Social Pathologies*, in "Constellations", 26, 2019, pp. 286-300. Regarding naturalism applied to the paradigm of recognition, see also I. Testa, *La natura del riconoscimento. Riconoscimento naturale e ontologia sociale nello Hegel di Jena*, Mimesis, Milano 2009; L. Cortella, *Freedom and Nature. The Point of View of a Theory of Recognition*, in L. Ruggiu, I. Testa (eds.), *"I that is We, We that is I." Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel*, Brill, Leiden 2016, pp. 169-180. For a brilliant reading of Hegel as a philosopher who proposes a "living ontology" that is dynamic and capable of self-changing, see S. Achella, *Pensare la vita. Saggio su Hegel*, il Mulino, Bologna 2019. Although I do not explore the relationship between life and nature applied to recognition here, I think it could be a very promising path.

8 See A. Laitinen, *Interpersonal Recognition. A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood*, in "Inquiry", 45, 4, 2002, pp. 463-478.

9 For this critique, see L. McNay, *Against Recognition*, Polity, New York 2008; M.J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, Rowman & Littlefield, London & New York 2016.



The exemplification made through the concept of pathologies, even with all the internal differences of perspectives, suggests that recognition causes suffering when its social and ethical patterns are traced to an immediate natural scheme, such that naturalisation and ideology<sup>10</sup> coincide, because they imply a loss of reflection – of mediation – and because the structures of recognition become invisible and thus uncritically accepted. I will give a brief account of what is currently meant by ‘social pathologies’ and intersect this topic with the ‘pathologies of recognition’. This is intended as an analysis of recognitional phenomena with regard to a theory of health or pathology, since the problem of the naturalisation of recognition seems to become most evident when such metaphors are used to describe and define experiences of social misrecognition.

Against this briefly sketched backdrop, I will propose my interpretation, starting from the definition provided by Honneth, who mentions the idea of social pathology in at least three relevant writings. In *Pathologies of the Social*,<sup>11</sup> he provides a definition of social pathology that is centred on the idea of self-realisation. Honneth later deploys this concept as a heuristic principle in *The Freedom’s Right*, in which, at least according to some of his critics<sup>12</sup> he emphasises the idea of a fair, self-confirming society on whose basis we can discern deviations and pathologies. He recently revisits this notion in *The Diseases of Society*, where social pathologies are explicitly linked to recognition: “On the whole, we seem to be drawn to the conclusion that one can speak of a societal disease or pathology if a society in its institutional arrangement fails, according to its prevailing values, at one of the tasks it takes up

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10 Särkelä equates ideology to artificial respiration in his article *Ideology as Artificial Respiration: Hegel on Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness*, in “Studies in Social and Political Thought”, 2, 25, 2015, pp. 107-126. With this metaphor, he argues that ideology is a tool designed to keep a dying organism alive. I agree with him, since ideology can be used to block change. Here, however, I extend my criticism of ideology to include all the relations that contribute to creating a social order and fostering the interpretation of it as natural.

11 See A. Honneth, *Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy*, in D. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford 1996, pp. 369-396.

12 Freyenhagen, among others, highlights the ‘reformism’ implied in the definition of social pathologies proposed by *Freedom’s Right*. He writes that social pathologies are considered by Honneth as “deviations from norms that are already embedded in the social fabric and that could be realized without fundamental changes to it” (F. Freyenhagen, *Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique*, in “Critical Horizons”, 16, 2, 2015, pp. 131-152, 143).

within the functional cycles of socialization, processing of nature, and regulation of relations of recognition".<sup>13</sup>

This third point traces the relationship between misrecognition and the realm of social pathologies. If we explain misrecognition in terms of a pathology the defining criteria of which are fixed once and for all, we miss the possibility that recognition itself can be distorted, thereby exacerbating social and moral suffering by regarding some mediated relational dynamics as naturally immediate. In addition to such explicit references, however, many other contributions by Honneth have illuminated this concept as it connects to the dynamics of recognition. This perspective is, I argue, traceable in some of his writings, particularly those that address the issues of recognition as ideology and institutionalised self-realisation,<sup>14</sup> where he focuses on the social and moral suffering caused by an ideological use of recognition. This use can be considered an uncritical acceptance of criteria and frames that become progressively naturalised. In other words, a definition of recognition that is considered an absolute value risks being overlooked as the cause of social and ethical suffering. Regarding institutionalised self-realisation, Honneth acknowledges that, although society can foster or impede it, self-realisation itself as a normative criterion is not discussed; rather, it is accepted uncritically. Instead of referring to 'pathologies' of recognition, I prefer to refer to the 'wounds' of recognition and, in so doing, hope to show that recognition produces more injuries precisely when it is assimilated into a natural phenomenon and becomes essentially immediate and invisible. Its practices and institutions should thus be included and represent the realm of the 'ought to', since, if they are conflated with something natural, they are not capable of recognising the specificity of humanity in terms of its creative, critical stance. In this tension towards duty, human beings gain the ability to articulate their request for recognition as capable and creative beings without resigning to pre-established patterns, if and when those patterns blur the capacity for self-criticising norms, customs, ethical values, or social institutions.

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13 A. Honneth, *The Diseases of Society. Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept*, in "Social Research", 81, 3, 2014, pp. 683-703, 699.

14 See A. Honneth, *Recognition as Ideology*, in B. van den Brink, D. Owen (eds.), *Recognition and Power. Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 323-347; Id., *Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Recognition*, in "European Journal of Social Theory" 7, 4, 2004, pp. 463-478.

This issue can be developed with the help of ethical considerations that explore the possibility of an indeterminate virtuality capable of actualising in unedited ways rather than limiting recognition to the realm of appearances. If it is true that misrecognition can provoke moral injuries and that recognition responds to a fundamental human need, it is even truer that what we recognise is fundamental as such: Form and content influence each other. When stabilised in patterns that are meant to be unchangeable, recognition misrecognises the most important feature of human beings: their capacity to discuss, critically negotiate, and transform society when it impedes the exercise of critique. Left open, the subject of recognition can be a vector that culminates not in the self-realisation of an individual alone, but in the self-transformation of society towards the common good. Recognition is realised only when it circulates among persons as a relational good, instead of blocking and reifying in fixed patterns, values, and forms of life. Respecting the capacity for critical endorsement, or for critical change, is the normative and anthropological kernel of recognition and can save it from the risk of ideology. It is worth noting that Zurn includes ideology among the forms of social pathologies, and Honneth endorses this view. Here, I propose to unmask the concept of social pathology based on recognitional relations as being ideological in itself, since it risks an excessive naturalisation of recognitional patterns. Zurn relates ideology to a lack of critical and reflexive attitudes among individuals, and defines the former as a kind of “second order disorders”.<sup>15</sup> This definition has been criticised by Laitinen, who endorses an “encompassing view”<sup>16</sup> that is not limited to reflexive capacities. He argues that social pathologies can operate without critical capacities being affected and that one must recognise the social fabric of individual reflexive capacities. Ideology thus acts at many levels, not only by inhibiting the critical and reflexive capacities of the individual. Taking our cue from Laitinen, we could say that a fortiori recognitional relationships should be left open to critique and should be directed to the possibility and capacity of the other to express a view and have a voice.

What I recognise in the other is their virtuality, being respectful of their becoming and not objectifying. Consequently, forms of recognition can occur that do not recognise autonomy and reproduce suffering and discrimination. The model of pathology raises many problems, specifically because it seems to naturalise (in the sense of making too immediate or

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15 C. Zurn, *Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders*, in D. Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth. Critical Essays*, Brill, Leiden 2011, pp. 345-370.

16 A. Laitinen, *Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders*, cit., p. 60.

spontaneous) the process of recognition by considering this process as inherently and naturally good. Recognition should instead be located within the realm of the duties of people towards one another, and it should not be taken for granted because it represents a frame that can always be discussed. Patterns of recognition established once and for all without accounting for mutability leave themselves open to criticism, particularly to criticisms that consider recognition an approach to losing the specificity of the self or a reifying glance. Furthermore, recognition – precisely in its being considered merely natural and immediate – can thus become an ideological tool.<sup>17</sup> What I wanted to show here is that the risk of ideology lies precisely in an ‘immediatisation’ of the patterns of recognition that foregoes a critical and deliberate appropriation of what is considered natural. Recognition practices that are assessed on a scale of normalcy and pathology risk assimilation into phenomena with lives of their own, instead of being products of personal and social relations.

## 2. *Recognizing the openness of autonomy*

To qualify as a duty, recognition must be insulated from at least two opposing risks. First, it should not be considered an absolute standalone principle; second, it should not be declined as a subjectivist stance. In a nutshell, recognition can be uncritically accepted neither in its capacity as an objective value nor in its status as entirely dependent upon the subject. It should be a tool – a pattern allowing for the possibility of ethical responses to life situations. These features can be summarised using the concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘indeterminacy’. Recognition is consistent with respect<sup>18</sup>

17 “Critical Horizons” *Special Issue*, 22, 1, 2021, is devoted to the French–German divide concerning the topic of recognition. Its title is *Recognition beyond French-German Divides: A Discussion with Axel Honneth* and is edited by M. Bankivski and D. Petherbridge. Moreover, as is known, Judith Butler was, at least initially, very critical of every form of recognition, considered as a form of subjectivation. This critique traces back to the French mistrust towards this category. See J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997. Honneth and Butler have engaged in dialogue on several occasions. Last but not least, see A. Honneth, J. Butler (eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*, Columbia University Press, New York 2021. See also the above quoted work by L. McNay, *Against Recognition*, cit.

18 “Respect implies that the agent *recognizes* the object of his action as a kind of reality *deserving* that disposition. I must realize that I am a person and the other is a person, in order to respect myself or any other”, R. Mordacci, *Recognition and*

for the other subject because we acknowledge the creativity and agency of someone who can reply. It goes without saying that this interpretation of recognition takes its cue from classical German philosophy, extending from Kant to Hegel via Fichte. I do not focus on those philosophers here; instead, I discuss the reading of Fichte provided by Axel Honneth, notably in his recent book, *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*:

The subject can set goals that allow it to shape and reshape nature in accordance with its own ideas, but this decision for free, self-determined activity cannot enable the subject to acquire an adequate picture of its own act of will [...] At this point in his deduction, Fichte fundamentally altered the framework of his own account by suddenly placing the subject among other subjects. In brief, as an observing philosopher, he asked how the subject's self-perception would change once suddenly faced with the presence of a similar being. Such an external subject encounters the subject by receiving a kind of "summons".<sup>19</sup>

Recognition is a matter of making room:

A subject must know that the speaker addressing it has been willing to restrict his own freedom, for by summoning another subject and thus expecting a free reaction, it must be willing to make room for the interests of his addressees [...] Fichte refers to the "summons" as an implicit expression of respect. In Fichte's view, calling upon someone to act always also means showing respect for that person, for the act of summoning presupposes that we refrain from asserting our own, private freedom.<sup>20</sup>

In this reconstruction, what counts as a moral principle is not recognised as such; rather, it is recognition of an entity that – while not necessarily in actual existence – can nonetheless exist, has existed, and can assume different and unpredictable shapes. Thus, recognition

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*Respect for Persons: A Personalistic Interpretation of Kant's Categorical Imperative*, in C. Rehmann-Sutter, M. Düwell, D. Mieth (eds), *Bioethics in Cultural Contexts. Reflections on Methods and Finitude*, Springer, Berlin 2006, pp. 129-143, p. 132. As for the connection between respect, recognition and autonomy, Mordacci writes: "And free will is what makes me an acting and responsible subject, and it also enables me to design, at least partially, my character as an individual" (p. 135), and "active respect means promoting the ends of persons" (p. 137).

19 A. Honneth, *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2021, p. 115. See also A. Honneth, *Die transzendente Notwendigkeit der Intersubjektivität*, in J.-G. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, (hrsg. J.-C. Merle), Akademie, Berlin 2001, pp. 63-80.

20 A. Honneth, *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, cit., p. 117.

deals with leaving room for the other and of treating and trusting the other as being capable of ethical agency and recognition in turn. This plea for the recognition of something that does not exist and cannot be objectified once and for all does not necessarily clash with the Honnethian interpretation of the Hegelian suffering from indeterminateness, rather it protects determination against the risk of stasis. Transcendentalism should be recovered in the sense of a condition of possibility rather than a sense of abstractness. In turn, this condition of the possibility of the non-dominative ethical gestures of recognition should be characterised by indeterminateness and openness to new possibilities. The bestower of recognition experiences it as a promise, whereas the receiver perceives it as an acknowledgment of the historical, narrative fabric of identity.

Critiques of indeterminateness are usually directed at abstractness. Freedom, so the arguments go, is not attainable if society does not provide the concrete conditions through which individuals can realise themselves. This critique faces the issue of recognition, since it is not enough to merely recognise that people are capable of freedom in principle if they can neither afford freedom nor access the material and symbolic conditions that render their agency possible and real. This kind of critique should be addressed to the social aspects of freedom that can impede or foster the participation of the individual in their freedom and in the construction of their sense of life. Nonetheless, there is a difference between acknowledging the presence of a strong interconnection between the material and symbolic aspects of human agency and fixing once and for all the social conditions, structures, and institutions within which freedom can be recognised and promoted in service of human flourishing and individual self-realisation. In the first case, the link between concrete and symbolic aspects is considered fundamental, but the ways in which it becomes real are not predetermined, and individuals retain their capacity to criticise social and moral structures; in the second case, the bond between social patterns of recognition and individual self-realisation seems too rigid.

In order to assess its ethical import, recognition should be directed towards an indeterminate<sup>21</sup> trait of personhood that could be associated with the indeterminate ‘becoming’, which includes under its umbrella

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21 My use of the expression ‘indeterminate’ is analogous to what Ikäheimo calls the “unconditional mode” of recognition. See H. Ikäheimo, *Conceptualizing Causes for Lack of Recognition: Capacities, Costs and Understanding*, cit.

the indefinite capacity for criticising those patterns and models, as well as for interpreting the past in light of the future. A too rigid bond tying social patterns, structures, and institutions to recognition – as if recognition could be possible only within those structures, which would constitute in themselves a sufficient guarantee for a life well lived – appears to be a deterministic, if not automatic, model of the relationship between the ethical self and society. Only a reconsideration of autonomy can serve as a criterion with which to (a) discern claims to recognition that aim to foster agency from those that exacerbate dependency, on both individual and social levels, and (b) promote immanent critical attitudes towards the context that can be reflectively endorsed or rejected in order to be transformed.

Some recognition relations subtly compel individuals to adapt to the dominant social and moral relations by playing on the striving for recognition, and they accentuate dependency because these individuals fail to do so. They can be corrected through a cross-consideration of recognition and autonomy, as Honneth does several times, as we will see later. If the former harms or prejudices the latter, it runs the risk of becoming an ideological tool or an unending process that leads people to live constantly ‘outside of themselves’, as Rousseau noted. Contrariwise, recognition relations are useful for interpreting autonomy from a relational viewpoint and for contextualising autonomous action. From this standpoint, Honneth and Anderson refer to ‘recognitional autonomy’ as a kind of autonomy the conditions of which lie in the acceptance, or hospitality, that the self receives from others on at least three levels – the same levels listed by Honneth in his theory of recognition.<sup>22</sup> Instead of interpreting this recognition as inclusion in a pre-established and fixed order of values, the recognition that fosters autonomy could be thought of as a promise or an act of trust towards those working to recognise themselves through the gaze of other(s). Autonomy is not possible without the context of relations that promote or impede the agency of the self. The fragility of agency should be preserved, both at the social and institutional levels, in terms of something that has the right to change and critically interpret the context, and not simply be adequate to it. A recognised and autonomous subject should be capable of perceiving and positioning the discrepancies between what is actually recognised as valuable and what could claim to

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22 See A. Honneth, J. Anderson, *Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice*, in J. Christman, J. Anderson (eds), *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism. New Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 127-149.

be recognised. Without the recognition of autonomy as virtuality, correcting institutions, social practices, and forms of life from an ethical viewpoint would be difficult.

The kind of autonomy at stake in recognition relations is not the autonomy meant as a competency that serves to maintain the order of society as a whole; rather, the kind of autonomy needed here is similar to that proposed by Cornelius Castoriadis:

Autonomy is not closure, but rather opening: ontological opening, the possibility of going beyond the informational, cognitive, and organizational closure characteristic of self-constituting, but *heteronomous* beings. It is ontological opening, since to go beyond this closure signifies altering the already existing cognitive and organizational system, therefore constituting one's world and one's self according to the other's laws, therefore creating a new ontological *eidos*, another self in another world.<sup>23</sup>

Castoriadis develops his argument on the social and political level:

Autonomy is, therefore, for us, at the social level, explicit self-institution, knowing itself as such. And this idea animates the political project of the instauration of an autonomous society [...] Autonomy as objective: Yes, but is that enough? Autonomy is an objective that we want for itself – but also for something else. Without that, we fall back in Kantian formalism, as well as into its impasses. We will the autonomy of society – as well as of individuals – both for itself and in order to be able to make/do things. To make/do what? [...] This what is related to contents, to substantive values – and this is what appears to be in crisis in the society in which we live. We are not seeing – or are seeing very little of – the emergence of new contents for people's lives, new orientations that would be synchronous with the tendency – which, actually, appears in many sectors of society – towards an autonomy, a liberation vis-à-vis simply inherited rules.<sup>24</sup>

Autonomy is understood as openness, as an explicit lucid awareness, and, as self-institution, it makes the link with recognition possible. There is an inextricable connection between recognition and autonomy, and they should be pursued in tandem. Recognition in a heteronomous context exacerbates dominative relations, and autonomy without recognition runs the risk of remaining a mere empty, abstract value without the possibility of concrete preservation or realisation. The type of recognition that possesses

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23 C. Castoriadis, *The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy*, in "Philosophy and Social Criticism", 20, 1/2, 1994, pp. 123-154, 145.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 150.



normative import should therefore be described as a recognition towards the indeterminateness of each individual and of their possibility of subverting the existing recognitional rules.<sup>25</sup>

Recognition is not always good, immediate, or reducible to a mere state of things. Autonomy allows for a distinction between dominative and liberating patterns of recognition. Recognitional relations form a kind of second nature, which cannot be considered always completely positive, since they can be reversed into “forms of naturalness and immediacy that are enemies of their own autonomy, signalling their ‘placement’ between quasi-natural relationships of domination and subjugation”.<sup>26</sup> In the moral and ethical fields, it is neither possible nor desirable for recognition to become immediately and uncritically naturalised, since this would run the risk of eliminating its transformative potential. Were recognition to become a natural fact, it would be limited to certifying what exists, and it would never be capable of subverting existing forms of suffering, nor of discovering and creating values and norms that do not exist. Only by stepping back and leaving room for the other’s way of responding to events can we recognise the moral potential in the other. Recognition is valuable only in the context of freedom as autonomy. Once again, according to Gregoratto and Ranchio,

what is at stake in the struggle is *the possibility of non-identity*, that is, the questioning of those identities that heteronomically constitute the subject. *What should be recognised is the other in the possibility of displacement and disruption of every identity, and as a result, of the inversion of the power relationships*. Only within this kind of dynamic is it possible to recognise, take responsibility for, and realise all the necessary consequences of the constitutive vulnerability and negativity of the other.<sup>27</sup>

Autonomy and recognition are two poles of the same dynamic, aiming to preserve recognition from ideology. The risk that some forms of recognition may become ideology has been discussed and illustrated by Honneth:

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25 Recognition resides within this dualism between autonomy and heteronomy, as Gregoratto and Ranchio recently noted (see F. Gregoratto, F. Ranchio, *Il dolore del determinato. Seconda natura e riconoscimento tra Hegel, Honneth e Butler*, in “La società degli individui”, n. 46, 2013/1, pp. 155-168. The title of their contribution plays on A. Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy. An Attempt to Reactualization of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Van Gorcum, Assen 2000.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 157 (English translation by the author of this article). Here, they refer to Hegel’s thought.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 168 (English translation by the author of this article).

The act of praising certain characteristics or abilities seems to have become a political instrument whose unspoken function consists in inserting individuals or social groups into existing structures of dominance by encouraging a positive self-image. Far from making a lasting contribution to the conditions of autonomy of the members of our society, social recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system.<sup>28</sup>

A reconsideration of the subject is clearly needed to acknowledge the ethical import of this cluster of categories. In particular, it is not possible to view the subject as a given entity; instead, it should be considered as one that becomes or realises itself through a narrative that can be more or less coherent. Recognising that there is always something that exceeds our operation of contouring the others is the transcendental feature of a recognition that can frame and inform all the concrete gestures of recognition that are not automatically positive, from either an ethical or social viewpoint.

The relational content of this exchange and the possibility of an ethical development are made possible thanks to a diachronic, rather than a synchronic, declination of the phenomena of recognition. I am recognised as being capable of leaving room for the other's autonomy, and I recognise others in the same sense. Even if the person with whom I am in a relation is as yet incapable of responding autonomously and freely, I should act *as if* they will acquire this capability, recover it, or even criticise it.

### 3. *Recognizing men and women as capable of co-authoring ethical and social frames*

This diachronic aspect of recognition as a moral principle pertains to historicity, situatedness, and narrativity. The latter means that recognition, to resist the objections of being an ideological tool, should account for

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28 A. Honneth, *Recognition as Ideology*, cit., p. 323. According to Honneth, the theory of recognition "seeks to draw attention to practices of humiliation or degradation that deprive subjects of a justified form of social recognition and thus of a decisive condition for the formation of their autonomy" (*ibid.*, p. 325). Thus, even if he explicitly connects recognition and autonomy, he nonetheless defines ideology in a way that is not directly associated with recognizing and criticizing the frame: "But the deficiency by which we might recognize such ideologies could consist in the structural inability to ensure the material prerequisites for realizing new evaluative qualities. Thus, between the evaluative promise and its material fulfillment, an abyss opens up that is characteristic in the sense that the provision of the institutional prerequisites would no longer be reconcilable with the dominant social order" (*ibid.*, p. 346).

the openness to the future as well as the possibility of changing the past that self-narratives imply. After establishing an explicit link between autonomy and recognition, we need to take a step further in order to clarify the meaning of a diachronic recognition of identities, values, and ends. This appeal to narrativity can help boost and dynamise recognitional patterns, in addition to acknowledging their ethical quality in terms of respect. The result is a sketch of a weak, formal anthropology with ever-present ethical implications. A considerable number of scholars have highlighted the inherent link between narratives and recognition, noting that giving an account of oneself and being the object of others' narratives are ways of recognising and being recognised.<sup>29</sup> What is at stake can be summarised in the following possibilities: (a) that of viewing oneself as the subject of new configurations and refigurations of their place in the world and of their direction; and (b) that this sort of recognition is grounded in an anthropology of creativity and freedom and that this should be considered a condition and an objective that can be reached within a lifetime and not only in a synchronic way.

First, I investigate the possibility of regarding the gesture of recognition as ethically relevant if directed towards the narrative thread of human existence. The diachronic extent of recognition once again testifies to the presence of a kind of recognition that does not reify or petrify the features of the subject recognised but that acknowledges that people are capable of liberating their agency towards the common good. This type of recognition requires temporality to be performed and fully enacted. In this interplay, what is at stake is respect for the possibility of change, which deserves a surplus of attention during its becoming. Temporalising the gesture of recognition by considering the self in its diachronicity means preserving the orientation and the unedited synthesis that the subject will be able to assume between projects and accidents, actions, and events. It means narrativising the act of recognition. This idea is partially included in Honneth's reflections on the morality of recognition:

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29 Ágnes Heller, among others, identifies at least two kinds of identity that can be associated with narratives and recognition: "One might distinguish two kinds of personal identity, better to say, personal identities, constructed from two different perspectives. One can be termed subjective or internal identity, the other objective or external identity" (Á. Heller, *Reflections on the Dynamics of Personal Identity in Modernity*, in Ead., *After Thoughts: Beyond the 'System'*, Brill, Leiden 2019, pp. 108-14, 108).

The first step of developing a morality of recognition consists in the essential proof that the possibility of moral injuries follows from the intersubjectivity of the human life form: human beings are vulnerable in that specific manner we call “moral” because they owe identity to the construction of a practical self-relation that is, from the beginning, dependent upon the help and affirmation of other human beings. If a positive concept of morality is to be drawn from this anthropological premise, then it is obvious to assign the purpose of protecting against the dangers referred to. What is understood by the “moral point of view” is the network of attitudes that we have to adopt to protect human beings from injuries that spring from the communicative presuppositions of their self-relation.<sup>30</sup>

What Honneth refers to here as the “practical self-relation” constructed with the unavoidable help – or the obstacle – of others can be equated with the space of articulation that should be recognised as such and preserved. Moral obligations result from this possibility of injury that is as radical as it is interior and intimate. The place of self-recognition, always already mediated by others, is also the locale where wounds can be produced, as well as where the subject can irreversibly renounce their status of co-author – not only of their own meaning but also of the ethical and social frames through which they recognise themselves – recognising the subject as a means to acknowledge their identity as an author or, at least, a co-author of the meaning of the biographical experience. Practices of recognition *via* narratives thus leave the possibility of change open and do not adhere to pre-determined patterns; they are capable of recognising human creativity as well as human positioning in context, responding in new ways when the old ones cause suffering and pain. The link between recognition and narrativity is fully ethical, since it belongs to the realm of duties. Recognising self-articulation as a fundamental right is a duty and can be referred to respectfully: By virtue of being respected as capable of articulation, the individual is recognised as eligible to co-author their life, and the more this capacity is considered worthy of preservation, the more certain moral obligations derive from it. The need to preserve such a capacity is far from associated with a paternalistic stance, for the very reason that this capacity is undetermined and should remain so. Narratives can be viewed as useful tools for interpreting and directing one’s own life, as well as a critical method for revising and positively altering the frames of recognition by discussing them and prefiguring other ways of effecting agency or acting ethically with and for others.

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30 A. Honneth, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, in “Social Research”, 1997, n. 1, pp. 16-35, 28-9.

Second, in order to sketch an anthropology based on formal frames of recognition, some features of narrativity as linked to creativity and freedom need to be further investigated. Recognising the other as a narrative co-author of their life with others means acknowledging (1) their sensitivity to interpretation, (2) their dependency on the trajectory<sup>31</sup> that they impress upon their life and that events can modify, and (3) their – at least virtual – capacity for changing the past. All these features reflect a notion of the human being as a creature who is exposed to historicity and events, one who is at the same time capable of responding with their own (narrative) resources to the uncertainty and apparent irreversibility of time. As suggested by Catriona Mackenzie, “Narrative self-interpretation is a response to this experience of change and fragmentation [...] Narrative integration is dynamic, provisional and open to change and revision; and over time the patterns of coherence with a life can shift”.<sup>32</sup> These anthropological features deserve recognition, which turns out to be the implicit, unavoidable frame of the sense of all human exchanges.

This anthropological thread treasures some features of narratives while abandoning others. In addition to evaluating the open teleology of narratives, their sensitivity to an interpretation that could be assimilated with a sort of dialogism – the transformative capacity, to use one of Bachtin’s categories – distances itself from the idea of coherence at all costs, accepting ambiguity instead,<sup>33</sup> and values them as traces of freedom. As for coherence, this concept is easily regarded as an immediately normative one. Coherence can be a tool for shaping one’s life and finding consonance between means and ends, but it cannot be assumed that every life is already coherent or that every life even automatically strives for coherence. Fragmented experiences, interrupted paths, and attempts to flourish should all be recognised as well, and their language should be preserved and acknowledged. If only coherent life narratives are recognised, ideology can even creep into this kind of recognition. Furthermore, coherence does not indicate goodness.

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31 The sensitivity to interpretation and the dependency on trajectories are listed by Karen Jones as features of narratives as applied to human life. See K. Jones, *How to Change the Past*, in K. Atkins, C. Mackenzie (ed.), *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, Routledge, New York 2010, pp. 269-288.

32 C. Mackenzie, *Introduction. Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, cit., pp. 1-28, 12.

33 Cf. A. Fabris, *Etica e ambiguità: Una filosofia della coerenza*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2020.

To close the circle, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the fact that, in his essay on social pathologies, Honneth refers to a “weak formal anthropology”<sup>34</sup> that “outlines the universal conditions of an unforced articulation of human life ideals”.<sup>35</sup> In a few lines, he raises the problem and provides the solution to it. Pathologies of the social kind are – seemingly inevitably – rooted in contexts that can become invisible and too readily accepted as ‘normal’ and morally constraining. To avoid this outcome, Honneth proposes the identification of an ideal, albeit a weak and formal one, that can serve as a criterion with which to distinguish what is socially pathological from what is not. I agree with this proposal, and I do not consider that such a criterion should necessarily be external or fixed once and for all. Rather, recognition should be directed precisely towards the dynamism of a self-reflecting and autonomous society.

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34 A. Honneth, *Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy*, in D.M. Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, cit., p. 392.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 393-394.

# RECOGNIZING FEMALES

## Hegel's Antigone-device

Stefania Achella

### *Abstract*

In what terms can the model of recognition theorized by Hegel be applied to the man–woman relationship? Following a long period, since the 1970s of the last century, of clear rejection of Hegel's dialectics within feminist circles, in recent decades, within the same feminist movements and gender studies, Hegel's ideas have been newly explored precisely to try and answer this question. The main claim of this contribution is that, rather than looking at the slave–master dialectic, in order to find Hegel's best account on the process of subjectivation and the claim to recognition by women, insightful pages are those dedicated to the figure of Antigone, to whom Hegel devotes a strikingly articulated and consequence-bearing reading in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. The model of recognition spelled out there also shows universal traits, which are particularly useful in addressing urgent issues of misrecognition typical of our society.

*Keywords:* Misrecognition, Tragedy, Feminism, Ethics.

### 1. *Antigone beyond Mastery and Servitude*

The notion of “recognition” is one of the most complex in Hegel's texts. Precisely this complexity has prompted from the start numerous interpretations. In particular, the section on *Mastery and Servitude* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which develops from the *Kampf um Anerkennung* (struggle for recognition), has been a place of constant confrontation and clash with Hegel's philosophy. From Marx to Fanon, Hegel's speculative system has been exposed as essentially bourgeois, Eurocentric, white. Undoubtedly one of the strongest attacks, however, has come from the feminist movements, which have denounced the macho and

violent character of those pages written by Hegel.<sup>1</sup> It is not about this radical rejection, however, that I wish to speak here.<sup>2</sup>

My goal is instead to show, also in reference to recent contributions, that Hegel's philosophy includes another model of recognition as well, and, more importantly, that this latter offers namely a possible way out of asymmetrical relations. This model can be found in the figure of Antigone.

Even before Judith Butler's disruptive analysis,<sup>3</sup> numerous accounts – from Luce Irigaray to Patricia Jagentowicz Mills<sup>4</sup> – have been devoted to Hegel's reading of Sophocles' heroine. Attention has been drawn in particular to Antigone's act, which can be understood as a request for recognition. Its form notably presents an alternative to the violence implicit in the life and death struggle.<sup>5</sup> Antigone's act is presented indeed as an act of insubordination, through which the woman rejects the "natural" destiny imposed on her by patriarchal institutions,<sup>6</sup> and claims a new role for herself. Moreover, by placing this figure in the section on the *Spirit* of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel makes it clear that we are no longer within the "anthropogenic" dimension of the human being and its typical struggle for recognition. Center stage is now given to the relational dynamics between

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- 1 C. Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel* [1970], in P. Jagentowicz Mills (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of G. W. F. Hegel*, Pennsylvania University Press, Pennsylvania 1996 (henceforth FI), pp. 275-298.
  - 2 On this point, starting from Axel Honneth's contribution, a vast critical literature has developed, which has provided an account of the potential and richness of the struggle for recognition. For one of the most recent and most representative texts see, among others: A. Honneth, *Recognition. A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020.
  - 3 J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000.
  - 4 N. Bauer, K. Hutchings, T. Pulkkinen, A. Stone, *Debating Hegel's Legacy for Contemporary Feminist Politics*, in K. Hutchings, T. Pulkkinen (eds.), *Hegel's Philosophy and Feminist Thought. Beyond Antigone?*, MacMillan Palgrave, New York 2010, pp. 233-252. For a detailed reconstruction of the debate on Hegel's *Antigone* interpretation and an accurate analysis of "the eternal irony of the community", see: F. Campana, *L'ironia di Antigone nella lettura di Hegel*, in L. Illetterati, A. Manchisi, M. Quante, A. Esposito, B. Santini (eds.), *Morality, Ethics, Religion between Classical German Philosophy and Contemporary Thought. Studies in Honor of Francesca Menegoni*, Padova University Press, Padova 2020, pp. 457-472.
  - 5 PhS, p. 111.
  - 6 An attempt to identify in the slave–master dialectic a model that can account for conflict but also for reconciliation between male and female was recently made by J.-B. Vuillerod, *Retour sur la Reconnaissance chez Hegel. Une perspective féministe*, in "Polemos", 3, 2019, pp. 183-202.



masculine and feminine, and the issue at stake is not the early development of self-awareness, but rather the need to overcome a naturalization of roles. Although in many passages Hegel seems to trace back, like Aristotle before him, the difference between man and woman to their natural constitution, his approach to the issue in these pages also betrays the belief that sexual discrimination is a political issue, or more generally second-natural, and that therefore it must be dealt with on the level of the spirit.<sup>7</sup> The recognition of females is therefore a cultural question, and a necessary phase of the spirit, as the reading of *Antigone* shows.

## 2. *When the marriage fails*

Antigone is not a cursory presence in Hegel's work. The Greek heroine and more in general Sophocles' works not only play a key role in the European culture of the late eighteenth century, but also act as a significant springboard for exchanges between Hegel and Hölderlin in the years they spent in Tübingen.

Already in 1787 a very young Hegel tried his hand at translating the *Oedipus at Colonus*. An attempt that also Hölderlin made, about ten years later, in 1796, and from which he would then transition, in the autumn of 1799, to *Antigone*. As is well known, the final – and much criticized<sup>8</sup> – German

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7 Even the possibility of emancipation from black slavery is identified by Hegel in culture. As one reads in the *Encyclopedia*: “Negroes are to be regarded as a nation of children who remain immersed in their uninterested and indifferent naivete. [...] they do not show an inner impulse towards culture”, G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, transl. from the 1830 Edition, together with the *Zusätze* by W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, revised with an *Introduction* by M. J. Inwood, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007, *Zusatz* § 393, p. 41. However, it should be clarified that for Hegel spirit and nature are not separate. Therefore, placing the issue of female emancipation on the level of the spirit does not mean dismissing the natural dimension. This latter remains at any rate the condition of possibility for the development of the spirit. According to Hegel, natural dispositions, corporeality, sensations, and feelings are in the spiritual dimension not irrelevant.

8 Cf. G. Steiner, *Antigones. How the Antigone Legend Has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1996, in part. pp. 66 f. About Hölderlin's translation, Steiner writes: “To Goethe and to Schiller, Hölderlin's treatment of the Greek text gave palpable evidence of mental collapse, of the *Umnachtung* (literally, ‘benightedness’) in which the poet endured from 1804 to his death in 1843. The same view is taken in Schelling's letter to Hegel of July 1804”, cf. G. Steiner, *Antigones*, cit., p. 66.

edition edited by Hölderlin was later printed in 1804.<sup>9</sup> Also Goethe, the two Schlegels, and Schelling developed a passion for *Antigone*. A widespread revival of interest in those years for the ancient Athenian political and poetic culture certainly explains the great fascination for Sophocles, and in particular for *Antigone*, in Germany, during the Romantic era. Athens stood indeed for the triumph of an unparalleled political ideal. And the form in which that political ideal took shape aesthetically, that is to say, the form of the tragedy, appeared particularly suited to a description of modern sensibility.<sup>10</sup> Tragedies express the incomplete split spirit of modernity; they translate in metaphorical terms the fall of human beings, their insubordination to destiny and, even in their defeat, their irreducible freedom.

For Hegel, Greek tragedies convey the moment of most extreme fracture, the explosion of contradiction, and thereby the possibility for the emancipation of humanity. The way in which, however, he includes Sophocles' tragedy in his *Phenomenology* implies also something more.

First, the reference to literary characters is Hegel's recurring device employed in order to effectively narrate the dismantling of traditional schemes. The protagonists of the great dramas, in fact, establish, by acting, the rule of their actions.<sup>11</sup> In *Hamlet*, in *Don Quixote*, and of course in *Antigone*, Hegel sees staged not only the description of great subjectivities, but also and above all their actions, namely the contradictions not only logical but also practical in which the protagonists find themselves, and the discovery, at the end of their dramas, of a new possible form of life. Moreover, as Kojève remarked, the clash between Antigone and Creon, "shows the conflict between two plans of existence,"<sup>12</sup> hence between two forms of life. Antigone, therefore, not only expresses the tragic spirit of modernity, but also the rebellion against a life plan pre-established by a natural order which makes no room for freedom, but only allows a blind necessary movement of obedience.

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9 Hölderlin published in 1804 only two volumes of the *Trauerspiele des Sophokles* for the Frankfurt publisher Friedrich Wilmans. The first included the *Ödipus. Der Tyrann*, the second *Antigonae*.

10 In Steiner's words: "A theory of tragedy is not an adjunct to Hegel's construct. It is a testing ground and validation for main tenets of Hegel's historicism, for the dialectical scenario of his logic, and for the central notion of consciousness in progressive conflict", G. Steiner, *Antigones*, cit., p. 21.

11 A. Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

12 A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Gallimard, Paris 1947, p. 102 (my transl.).

Human beings, however, cannot be reduced to nature alone – nor to culture alone. The established tie between the world of nature and women, and between that of culture and men signals, according to Hegel, a dangerous perspectival partiality, which needs to be overcome. This opposition, Hegel makes clear, “only expresses the superficial opposition of both aspects to each other.”<sup>13</sup> Once the ethical sphere is reached, the gap and laceration between the form of life of the *polis* – which is the sublimation of the male model – in which the individual is recognized in his universality, and the *oikos*, in which individuality – thanks to the female – recovers its dignity, is bound to be overcome.

One should however remark that it is only during his studies that Hegel came to reach the standpoint that the relationship between masculine and feminine needs to be addressed in the spiritual sphere. In fact, in his first attempts at writing, back in the Frankfurt years, the relationship between lovers was handled by Hegel according to a quite different attitude. Back then Hegel seemed to explore the possibility of forming an intersubjective relationship, far removed from any external interest, which could effectively achieve equality in the relationship between human beings. Hegel’s solution, perhaps influenced by the prevailing Neoplatonism of the time, is to resort to a metaphysical theory rather than to an ethical one. The main force is in fact love as a superior instance expressing the reconciliation of life with itself. And, as a finite expression of this metaphysical level, the couple seems to be able to embody a model of recognition, that does not give in to forms of domination and hostility toward one another. It is not about defeating the enemy, as this model rather indicates the defeat of hostility. Love is the moment of recognition of the other without going through the struggle. As a result, the bond that unites lovers is seen as a relationship of duplication that takes the form of a mirroring, through which the process of recognition takes place. Love, to take up Hegel’s well-known formulation, stands for the ability to see in the other the equal to oneself, at least potentially.

Yet Hegel does not fully indulge in this Platonic aspiration. In the love relationship, he remarks, either there is a fusal relationship, and in this case, whoever dissolves in the fusion loses their status of autonomous subjectivity; or the parties remain in their obstinate singularity, which is expressed in possession, from corporeality to material

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13 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. and ed. by T. Pinkard, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018 (henceforth PhS), p. 257.

goods. This latter is a relationship of mutual externality, that can only be superseded through the act of marriage, therefore on the juridical level. The result of the Frankfurt analysis is finally that the couple's love relationship fails to be a place of mutual recognition. It is either too much or too little.

It is perhaps on this ground that a few years later, in 1802, in the article *Über die wissenschaftliche Behandlung des Naturrechts*, the couple's relationship appears deprived of amorous ambitions and is delivered hands down to the practical level of the relationship between the individual and the state, between legislative decrees and ethics based on custom, to which Hegel also adds the "natural" contrast between male and female.

And in the texts drafted between 1805-06, Hegel delves even deeper in this distinction. The differences in constitution mean that in the desiring relationship a division is produced between the one who wishes, who is therefore an active part, the subject – the male – and the one who is desired, the passive part, the object – the female<sup>14</sup>: "The male has desire, drive; the feminine drive is far more aimed at being the object of drive, to excite, to arouse drive and to allow it to satisfy itself in it."<sup>15</sup> Moving away from fusional love, Hegel lands on the acknowledgment of the asymmetry in gender relations: the male reduces the female to an object, and thus deprives her of the status of subject, making it impossible for a dynamic of recognition to take place in the love or marital relationship. Moreover, Hegel also writes: "the slave can become property as an entire personality, and so can the wife."<sup>16</sup> Hegel seems then to agree with later feminist readings that the relationship of recognition cannot be applied to the man–woman relationship, but it can at best bear witness to the misrecognition of female otherness.

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14 Here Hegel takes up the Aristotelian theory of the natural distinction between male and female. As a result, as long as women remain tied to their natural determination, they cannot be "recognized" in their process of autonomous subjectivation. Cf. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, transl. by A.L. Peck, Book I–II, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1943, 766a 30–31, pp. 391-393.

15 G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit. A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6) with Commentary*, ed. by L. Rauch, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1983, p. 105.

16 G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. and ed. by H.S. Harris, Th. M. Knox, State University of New York Press, Albany 1979, p. 128.

### 3. *Rejecting misrecognition*

It is precisely at this point that the remarks on *Antigone* come into play. In the history of the experience of the spirit, Antigone stages the archaic world and its clear contrasts between human and divine law, between masculine and feminine, between culture and nature. In the process of the spirit moving toward its own self-realization, Antigone therefore comes to embody the contradiction of this separation, declaring it no longer acceptable. Moreover, Hegel must have noticed that, right in her name, Antigone opposes her purpose/destiny (*Bestimmung*) to bear children. As a result, despite being called to defend the values of the family, and therefore of nature, in doing so she inexorably shows the impossibility of maintaining a clear distinction of realms. In representing the natural values Antigone is already outside and beyond them.

The form in which this contradiction takes shape in the tragedy, through the clash between Creon and Antigone, translates into the contrast between *the law of the day*, that of the *polis*, and the law of the family, *the law of the night*. In the background, the contrast between masculine and feminine. According to Hegel, this distinction of competences is also exemplified by the different “elaboration” of death. It is no coincidence, on a side note, that death is the undisputed protagonist of Sophocles’ tragedy.

Within the political community the individual dies, must die, to generate the immortal universality of the community; therefore, the individual is not recognized as this individual. Within the family, instead, death allows individuals to rediscover their own individuality through the funeral ritual organized by their relatives.<sup>17</sup> Whereas, Hegel argues, the (male) individual obtains his true recognition only in the transition from the family to the community, the recovery of his particularity occurs instead in the family, which through a worthy burial and funeral rituals saves him from total dissolution (symbolic, in the community, biological in nature) and fully recognizes his peculiarity. The lifeless

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17 The Hegelian argument here echoes Giambattista Vico’s pages in which the Neapolitan philosopher explains that humanity “began with ‘humare’”, that is, with “burying”, so that being human actually means giving burial to bodies, respecting the bodies in their sacred value. The “burials” therefore indicate the devotion that is owed to the dead, to the bodies of the dead. At § 337 of the 1744 *Scienza nuova*, Vico effectively draws attention to a scenario of this kind: “imagine a feral state in which human corpses remain unburied on the earth to be bait for crows and dogs [...]; men like pigs would go about eating acorns grown inside the rot of their dead relatives”, G. Vico, *Principi di Scienza Nuova*, Naples 1744, p. 117 (my transl.).

body would in fact return to a state of “*pure being*,” inorganic nature. Instead, the family retrieves its being no longer as a natural being but as a member of a community.

The family keeps the dead away from those dishonoring acts of unconscious desire and abstract creatures, and in place of them, it puts their own acts; it weds their kin to the womb of the earth, to the elemental, imperishable individuality. The family thereby makes the dead into a member of a polity which instead overwhelms and keeps in check the powers of the particular elements of matter and the lower living creatures which come to be free from him and which sought to destroy him.<sup>18</sup>

This is the “ethical” task of the family: to recognize and save the particularity of the individual. The family therefore stands as a place of recognition for the individual. But does this recognition hold true for the male and the female? The answer is definitely no.

As he already anticipates in Jena, Hegel is well aware that families feature relationships of asymmetry; he namely focuses on three types of family bond: husband-wife, parents-children, brother-sister.

In the marriage relationship, as already explained in the Jena years, the real moment of unification takes place in a third party (i.e. the engendered child). The couple is not enough in itself to recognize each other.

Differently, in the parent–child relationship recognition occurs indirectly: parents see in their children a relationship which becomes other, “they see their children come to their own being-for-itself without the parents being able to get it back;”<sup>19</sup> also on the part of the children the recognition process refers to something other than themselves: their “having their own in itself in an other who is vanishing, and in achieving being-for-itself and their own self-consciousness only through separation from their origin – a separation within which the origin recedes.”<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, for Hegel, marriage does not establish a true recognition-based relationship, inasmuch as it unites two unrelated persons, who therefore remain biologically distinct. Similarly, within the family, the child remains different inasmuch as it has a separate existence. As a place for recognition marriages are a failure.<sup>21</sup> The definition of family in the ethical sphere is

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18 PhS, p. 261.

19 PhS, p. 263.

20 PhS, p. 263.

21 Here it is useful to remind the reader that, in the famous Frankfurt fragment on love, Hegel identifies the limit of recognition between husband and wife in property (whether understood as a body or as real property), while in the Jena years

“an immediate consciousness of itself” and “a natural ethical community.”<sup>22</sup> This lack of recognition is all the more true for women, who, in their role as mothers and wives, remain a universal function deprived of individuality. “In the household of ethical life, it is not *this* man, and it is not *this* child; rather, it is *a man, children as such* – these female relationships are grounded not on sentiment but on the universal.”<sup>23</sup>

On the contrary, as the tragedy of Antigone testifies, the male in the family gets his recognition as a particularity, and he becomes *this* father, *this* husband. However, this recognition remains partial, because there is no conflict in it, and therefore, the relationship remains linked to the biological, natural dimension,<sup>24</sup> without reaching a conscious ethical intention. This is why the adult male leaves the family and turns to the *polis*, the only institution capable of recognizing or realizing the universal aspect of human action – leaving the sphere of the particular to the family.<sup>25</sup>

A man turns to the city, writes Hegel, “because it is only as a citizen that he is actual and substantial, the individual, so far as he is not a citizen but belongs to the Family, is only an unreal insubstantial shadow.”<sup>26</sup> From being a biological being, defined in Aristotelian terms by his particularity as a mere living being, as he transitions to life in the city, a man obtains a status of universality, and thus comes to live in and for the universal.

As a result, whereas women in marriage never separate the ethical (universal) dimension from the affective (particular) one, this separation occurs in the case of men. In this respect, men transfer the ethical dimension to the public sphere, while placing desire in the private sphere. “The husband’s authority and position in the *polis* allow him to have sexual domination over the wife in the family and simultaneously keep him ‘detached’ from

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the gap is much more a “spiritual” matter. Preventing mutual recognition in the couple is the inequality and the essential gap featured by ancient Greek ethics and culture. This signals the development of a different approach in Hegel’s understanding of the man–woman relationship. On the subsequent evolution of this relationship in the *Outlines*, see E. Rózsa, *Von Antigone zur anständigen Frau Hegels Frauenbild im Spannungsfeld zwischen der Phänomenologie des Geistes und der Rechtsphilosophie von 1820*, in OF, pp. 259-275.

22 PhS, p. 268.

23 PhS, p. 264.

24 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel’s Antigone*, in FI, p. 60.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 59–88. Jagentowicz Mills’s account, some key passages of which we will include in the following pages, arrives however at a very radical conclusion: “the modern world described by Hegel, like the pagan world, is made at woman’s expense and [...] Antigone is misused to represent woman in the family in transhistorical terms”, *ibid.*, p. 78.

26 PhS, p. 270.

his desire for her: Man rules woman in the private sphere because he rules in the public world. And as he rules in the public world and in the family he rules himself."<sup>27</sup>

An insurmountable contradiction comes to the fore here: "In the pagan world the family and the *polis*, the particular and universal spheres of man's existence, are mutually exclusive [...]. This conflict between the familial and the political makes for the tragic character of pagan life and creates a fundamental antinomy between family life, as the natural ground of ethical life, and ethical life in its social universality, or 'second nature,' in the *polis*."<sup>28</sup> This creates a separation of competences: the family world is the female one and embodies the divine law, while the world of the *polis* embodies virility and the law of the male.<sup>29</sup>

It is at this moment that the misrecognition of women appears in all evidence. While both, male and female, do not fully achieve their recognition in the family, men find their fulfillment in the *polis*, but women remain "condemned" to the hearth. Women are therefore missing the recognition of their particularity, since they dissolve in the natural ethical universality of the family, and, what's more, they never reach that universality that only the *polis* can grant.

It is therefore clear that the relationship between husband and wife cannot be one of mutual recognition.<sup>30</sup> "Husband and wife are 'others' for each other."<sup>31</sup>

27 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel's Antigone*, in FI, p. 62.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

29 Patricia Jagentowicz Mills writes that: "The family represents life and the *polis* represents the risk of life. The conflict between these two spheres is inescapable and unalterable. Man cannot renounce the family since he cannot renounce the particularity of his existence nor can he renounce the universality of his action in and for the *polis*." Cf. P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel's Antigone*, in "The Owl of Minerva", 17, 2, 1986, pp. 131-152, here p. 132.

30 Hence the critique moved by the feminist movement, starting with contributions like the one by Carla Lonzi, who rejects any merely formal recognition of equality, reiterating instead the request for concrete participation in the management of political power (cf. C. Lonzi, *Let's Spit on Hegel*, in FI, p. 276). For a different perspective, see S. Benhabib, who instead emphasizes how, in various passages of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel refers to women as not naturally but culturally and socially defined. These passages would prove Hegel's "awareness of the cultural, historical and social variations in family and sexual relations", S. Benhabib, *On Hegel, Women and Irony*, in FI, pp. 25-44, here p. 30. Hence also Hegel's criticism of the abstract equality of modernity, since distinctions connected to sex and age are still maintained in citizen life.

31 S. Doğan, *Reading Hegel on Women and Laughing. Hegel against or with Women / Other?*, in S. Achella, F. Iannelli, G. Baptist, S. Feloj, F. Li Vigni, C. Melica



#### 4. *Is it enough to have a brother?*

The relationship between brother and sister appears to Hegel in different terms.<sup>32</sup> They are free individuals who do not depend on a third party but are linked by the same blood. This is so because desire does not intervene to make the relationship uneasy and unequal. They are ὁμαίμος, because they share the blood of the same mother and of the same father.<sup>33</sup> In the sister–brother relationship, therefore, the fracture between desire and ethics that produces the inequality between male and female is overcome: “To the sister, the brother is the motionless essence itself, equal to her, and her recognition (*Anerkennung*) in him is pure and unmixed with any natural relation. The indifference of singular individuality and its ethical contingency is thus not present in this relationship. Rather, the moment of the singular self, as recognizing and being recognized, may here assert its right because

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(eds.), *The Owl's Flight. Hegel's Legacy to Contemporary Philosophy*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2021 (henceforth OF), pp. 225–237, here p. 234.

- 32 The scholarly literature has dealt extensively with this topic in reference to the particularly strong relationship between Hegel and his sister, discussing as well the topic of incest in this regard. Here we are not interested in addressing the issue highlighted by Lacan and in part redefined by Butler of the tabooization by Hegel of the topic of incest. On this point, see J. Lacan, *The Seminar, Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Muller, transl. by Dennis Porter, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1992; J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, cit., p. 66. For a detailed discussion of Hegel's relationship with his sister and with women in general, see F. Iannelli, *Hegel's Constellation of the Feminine between Philosophy and Life. A Tribute to Dieter Henrich's Konstellationsforschung*, in OF, pp. 239–255.
- 33 Cf. E. Caramelli, *Antigone and the Phenomenology of Spirit Between Literary Source (vv. 925–928) and Philosophical Reading*, in OF, pp. 293–303, here pp. 296–297. As Caramelli remarks, Antigone's ethical constitution is determined by the logic of the *same*, clearly expressed in the heroine's will to do everything by herself. In this regard, mention should be made of Nicole Loraux's study, which, starting from this feature of Antigone's attitude, provides an account of her monadic identity. Cf. N. Loraux, “La main d'Antigone”, in “Metis”, 1, 1986, pp. 165–196, here p. 170. In this regard, Caramelli remarks: “What is paradoxical is that, while obviously wanting to break free from the curse of the Labdacids – the inexorable logic of the same – on which, except a few words from Ismene, Antigone places the veil of silence and oblivion, she is fatally, once again, αὐτόνομος and αὐτόγνωτος, up to the extreme of self-destruction. Therefore, as regards the treatment of immediate ethics, Antigone gives an exemplary account of how ancient subjectivity, characterized by unilateral pathos, was not equipped to accept otherness in itself and therefore did not know how to cope with contradiction”, E. Caramelli, *Antigone and the Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., p. 297. This self-referentiality would entrust to Antigone herself the sense of her misrecognition.

it is bound up with the equilibrium of blood relations and with relations utterly devoid of desire. The loss of a brother is thus irreplaceable to the sister, and her duty towards him is the highest."<sup>34</sup>

Since there is no mixing of external elements (neither biological extraneousness, nor the separation introduced by desire with respect to the ethical bond), each of the siblings recognizes and is recognized.

The brother–sister relationship is a unity of male and female that is not recognition as separation, distinctiveness or dissimilarity: It is a relationship of identity-in-difference. Their recognition is that of ‘free individualities in regard to each other’ which transcends the indifference or ethical contingency characteristic of the husband–wife relationship.<sup>35</sup>

The only way available to women to obtain true recognition in the ethical dimension is then through brothers.<sup>36</sup> In this perspective, one can better understand why Antigone is deeply devastated by the death of her brother: “the death of a brother thus becomes an irreparable loss for the sister since with his death she loses the ideal relationship with a man.”<sup>37</sup>

However, as many feminist interpreters have shown, this form of recognition of women remains insufficient. This is so for numerous reasons. First of all, the absence of reciprocity. Following Luce Irigaray’s remark, one can agree that, while a brother can use his sister as a “living mirror,” to look at himself through her, a sister does not find in her brother any image that allows her to access universality.<sup>38</sup> The recognition of Antigone is made possible by the fact that she is able to identify herself, or see herself reflected, in the value of Polynices, but not in her own.

But there is more. As Patricia Jagentowicz Mills pointed out,<sup>39</sup> this recognition occurs when the brother is still in the family, meaning that he is a man only “potentially.” His recognition of his sister is therefore also quite potential only. Moreover, while, as *Antigone* shows, the obligation to bury

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34 PhS, p. 264.

35 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel’s Antigone*, in FI, p. 63.

36 Hegel retains his understanding of the ethical purity of the brother–sister relationship in the *Philosophy of History*, where he describes Apollo as “pure” precisely because “he has no wife, but only a sister [Artemis, the virgin goddess of hunt], and is not involved in various disgusting adventures, like Zeus”, G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, transl. J. Sibree, Dover, New York 1956, pp. 245–246.

37 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel’s Antigone*, in FI, p. 64.

38 Cf. L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1993, pp. 116–118.

39 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel’s Antigone*, in FI, p. 65.

the brother and to honor his memory remains entrusted to the woman, as guardian of family law, the same does not apply to the man who leaves his family of origin never to return.

Finally, what happens to a woman without a brother? The recognition expressed by this type of relationship is contingent and occasional and as such it cannot structure the consciousness of the feminine.

The limits of Hegel's reading of *Antigone* on this point are clear. Yet, although not directly declined in terms of gender emancipation, Hegel's remarks seem to acknowledge the inadequacy of this ethical model, which is seen as bound to collapse and precisely at the hands of Antigone. Since the polis does not recognize her in her individuality, she destroys it: "Woman, as the representative of the family principle, the principle of particularity which the polis represses, is the internal cause of the downfall of the pagan world."<sup>40</sup>

In Hegel's words: "While the polity gives itself stable existence only by disrupting familial happiness and by dissolving self-consciousness in the universal, it creates an internal enemy for itself in what it suppresses, which is at the same time essential to it, or it creates an enemy in the feminine itself. By intrigue, the feminine – the polity's eternal irony – changes the government's universal purpose into a private purpose, transforms its universal activity into this determinate individual's work, and it inverts the state's universal property into the family's possession and ornament."<sup>41</sup>

Ironically, in this interplay between recognition and misrecognition, it is the latter that prompts Antigone<sup>42</sup> to leave the sphere of the family and to act in the public world, turning her gesture from private to political.<sup>43</sup>

While it is true that she is in the polis on behalf of the family, nevertheless she experiences the duality of pagan life and has the potential to become this particular self. Through the conscious risk of life in the sphere of the polis, Antigone transcends the limitations of womanhood set down by Hegel.<sup>44</sup>

40 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel's Antigone*, in FI, p. 67.

41 PhS, p. 275.

42 On this point, see Adorno's analysis, which distinguishes between particular and particularity, Th. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E.B. Ashton, Seabury, New York 1973, p. 173. As Jagentowicz Mills comments: "for Adorno the concept of the particular is a concept of the dialectics of non-identity whereas the concept of particularity eliminates the particular as particular in order to absorb it into a philosophy of identity dominated by the universal", P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel's Antigone*, in FI, p. 68.

43 Cf. J.B. Elshtain, *Moral Woman and Immoral Man: A Consideration of the Public-Private Split and Its Political Ramifications*, in "Politics and Society", 4, 1974, pp. 453-473.

44 P. Jagentowicz Mills, *Hegel's Antigone*, in FI, p. 73.

Antigone's agency marks the abandonment of the static sphere of being, to which the woman is naturally confined, to move on to the dynamic act of doing. As a result, while experiencing her tragedy, Antigone establishes the rules that guide her action. There is no absolute norm based on which she can describe herself – and discriminate. Antigone “generates” her own norm and, “In taking upon herself the inevitable guilt of action, in opposing the feminine-ontological to the masculine-political, Antigone stands above Oedipus: her ‘crime’ is fully conscious. It is an act of self-possession even before it is an acceptance of destiny.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the tragedy, Hegel seems indeed to grasp the emancipatory and self-affirmative potential of Antigone's act. This is also confirmed by his paying little attention to the figure of his sister Ismene, who on the contrary remains anchored to traditional values. While advocating her female condition, Ismene refuses to act and thereby denies her moral dimension, anchoring herself to nature and at the same time surrendering herself to an ahistorical immobility. And this is why, as it is the case in the relationship of one servant to another, Antigone cannot find recognition in the relationship with her sister. Although Ismene tries to overcome her initial fear and offers to share responsibility for the act Antigone has done, this latter refuses, considering herself solely responsible for what happened. Creon also refuses to attribute co-responsibility to Ismene. What counts is the concrete action, the effective action, and not the word. With respect to Antigone's action, Ismene remains withdrawn and passive. While based on her *agency* Antigone can be recognized.

### 5. Taking the recognition

This reinterpretation of *Antigone*, supported as well by feminist readings, allows to identify in the act of Antigone an alternative model of recognition, which can be beneficially applied to the reading of all asymmetrical relationships.

Antigone claims a form recognition that does not go through the life and death struggle, but rather relies on an act of disobedience.<sup>46</sup> This implies an

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45 G. Steiner, *Antigones*, cit., p. 35.

46 On the relevance of Antigone as a warning for the respect of human rights, see F. Iannelli, *Wenn der Feind auch der Bruder ist: die unschuldige Schuld von Hegels Antigone*, in “Scientia Poetica”, 13, 2009, pp. 120-134; and A. Siani, *Unvollkommene Gerechtigkeit. Hegel, Antigone und die Menschenrechte*, in Th. Oehl, A. Kok (eds.), *Objektiver und absoluter Geist nach Hegel. Kunst, Religion und Philosophie innerhalb und außerhalb von Gesellschaft und Geschichte*, Brill,

act of responsibility, which also marks the transition from the first-natural dimension to the ethical dimension.

This model, which has been applied to the possible forms of emancipation of women in the 1970s, can now also be applied to new rights. The issue connected to Antigone is in fact how to assert a right not yet recognized. Let's think about migrants today.<sup>47</sup> Acting as "illegal citizens"<sup>48</sup> or as "unauthorized citizens,"<sup>49</sup> they state without mediation, just like Antigone, their belonging to the ethical community.<sup>50</sup> They demand their right to life and dignity to be recognized. Against positive law they exercise an eternal right. They therefore introduce a dynamic and emancipatory potential and set in motion what appears to be standing still. As we read in the *Phenomenology*,

The agent can neither deny the crime nor deny his guilt. – The deed consists in setting the unmoved into motion, which thereby brings forth what had been sealed off as mere possibility, and it links the unconscious to the conscious and the non-existent to being. In this truth, therefore, the deed comes to light – as that in which the conscious is combined with the unconscious and in which what is one's own is combined with what is alien.<sup>51</sup>

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Leiden/Boston 2018, pp. 191-212. On the later use of the figure of Antigone, see S. Fornaro, *Il disordine di Antigone*, in C. Cao, A. Cinquegrani, E. Sbrojavacca, V. Tabaglio (edd.), *Maschere del tragico*, "Between", VII, 14, 2017, <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>, here pp. 14-15. Cf. H.-T. Lehmann, *Erschütterte Ordnung – Das Modell Antigone*, in *Das politische Schreiben*, Theater der Zeit, Berlin 2002, pp. 28-43.

- 47 Today this model takes on a very precise form in the proposals of thinkers such as Étienne Balibar and Engin Isin, who, while analyzing the disavowal of migrants' rights, propose the ideas of "insurgent citizenship," "activist citizenship," and "acts of citizenship," which "inevitably imply a break with habits." In these cases, migrants directly claim and exercise, regardless of their legal status, their rights. Cf. E. Balibar, *At the Borders of Citizenship: A Democracy in Translation?*, in "European Journal of Social Theory", 13, 3, 2010, pp. 315-322; E.F. Isin, *Theorizing acts of citizenship*, in E.F. Isin, G.M. Nielsen (eds), *Acts of Citizenship*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2008, pp. 15-43, here p. 18.
- 48 E. Rigo, *Citizenship at Europe's Borders: Some Reflections on the Post-Colonial Condition of Europe in the Context of EU Enlargement*, in "Citizenship Studies", 9, 1, 2005, pp. 3-22.
- 49 S. Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, pp. 294-296.
- 50 Cf. Butler's notion of performative acts, in J. Butler, G.C. Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-state?: Language, Politics, Belonging*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 2007.
- 51 PhS, p. 272.

In carrying out the act, what is ethical becomes actual, and that crime reveals its necessity.

Antigone chooses to act by breaking the rights delimited by the *jus*. With her act she shows that new needs and new rights, which society still does not accept or recognize, must be taken into account. “This makes of Antigone a promise of social transformation that does not move from abstract hypothesis, but rather from effective livable units, striving to make of its forms of life new units of social recognition.”<sup>52</sup>

Each breaking of the law of the day becomes a wound, a necessary crime in the recognition process, and, Hegel concludes, “Because we suffer, we recognize (*anerkennen*) that we have erred.”<sup>53</sup>

This is the fracture introduced by all those who do not see themselves recognized in their otherness by the common nature of powers (language, knowledge, forms of life). *Antigone* then stages not only the confrontation between the *oikos* and the *polis*, but also the requests of all those who refuse to submit to family, social, and political ties that appeal to an unjustified eternal norm. As Sophocles and later Hegel show, that of Antigone is not an act that threatens the social ethical order tout court, but a request for recognition. This model of recognition is not dialogic, but also not violent. It goes through an impact, through an act of negation, of disobedience, a determined negation, which advances a claim to universality challenging the different powers in conflict, in view of a rethinking of the ethical order.<sup>54</sup>

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52 N. Sánchez Madrid, *Giving an Account of Precarious Life and Vulnerability. Antigone's Wisdom after Hegel*, in OF, pp. 151-162, here pp. 159-160.

53 PhS, p. 272. This is the translation, presumably made by Hegel, of verse 926 of the *Antigone*: “Weil wir leiden, anerkennen wir, daß wir gefehlt”, G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* [1807], in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9, W. Bonsiepen, R. Heede (eds.), Meiner, Hamburg 1980, here p. 255.

54 N. Sánchez Madrid, *Giving an Account of Precarious Life and Vulnerability*, cit., p. 160.

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# THE CUNNING OF RECOGNITION IN THE FOUR AXIOMS OF EXISTENCE

Elizabeth A. Povinelli

## *Abstract*

This essay examines the politics of late liberal settler recognition from the perspective four axioms of existence and from within a case study of the disinheritance of two sets of clans. After reviewing the author's intellectual position with the literature on recognition, the essay argues that scholarship on recognition needs to be reframed within four axioms of existence emerging in critical theory in the wake of geontopower and then moves to a short overview of how this reframing might provide new methods to the study of contemporary cultural politics. The four axioms of existence are the entanglement of existence; the unequal distribution of power to affect the local and transversal terrains of this entanglement; the multiplicity and collapse of the event as the *sine qua non* of political thought; and the provincial racial and colonial history that informed liberal western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the west as such. The clans are the author's own Simonaz clan of Povinellis that emerged at least by the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Alpine village of Carisolo and the clans of the Karrabing in the Top End of the Northern Territory of Australia.

*Keywords:* Late liberalism, Geontopower, Heritability, Recognition.

## *Some prehistory*

When I published *The Cunning of Recognition* in 2002, political philosophy and critical theorists had been engaged in intense arguments about the purpose and potential of state-based social and cultural recognition and about the ways state recognition did or did not mirror the publics to which it was addressed for at least a decade. A raft of essays and books had flooded out from journals and presses arguing that recognition was a necessary component of human flourishing; a state and capital strategy of defanging radical critique; and as inexorably linked to the dialectics of public and counter-public formation. All of the major works during these turbulent years presupposed that the politics of recog-

dition – whether irreducibly liberal, potentially revolutionary, or simply the dialogical nature of human well-being – were about human modes of sociality and expressivity. The human difference centered the argument no matter whether the author was foregrounding race, sexuality, ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender or class and whether they focused on political publics, state function, or cultural expressivity.

I approach the problem of recognition from an analysis of late liberalism, namely, the means by which late liberal-based capitalist orders have attempted to redirect the energies and commonsense of anticolonial and new social movements. The great uprising against the paternalistic and civilizational rhetoric justifying white, primarily male, supremacist imperialism across the Global South in the 1950s threatened the ongoing accumulation of wealth by dispossession in the Global North. While this was not the first revolt against western hegemony, by the 1960s and early 70s, the Global South had gained an economic power that fueled the movement, evidenced, for example, in the emergence of OPEC and its ability to destabilize the US economy. Thus, late liberalism is method of periodization so that one can gather together shifts in the liberal governance of difference and markets and see it as a reaction-formation to the agency of a multiplicity of anticolonial and radical social movements. Its mode of governance difference is to demand those historically excluded demonstrate how their way of life differs from but does not violate the skeletal principles of liberalism as such. Take, for instance, the foundational decision in *Mabo v State of Queensland, 1993*, to finally recognize what it called native title. This decision encapsulates key tactics of liberal recognition when it applies to Indigenous and Native peoples – *a mea culpa* (“on past prejudice”), absorption of difference into logics of western law (“native title corresponds to within settler state jurisprudence”), the sequestration of difference into a precolonial past (“change but not too much”), and a strict limit on powers of the incorporated (“as long as it does not shatter the skeletal principles of law”).

The phrase late liberalism might be misleading. I don’t mean it as late-stage liberalism. Late is meant in the sense of being late to one’s own party; it is at its core a belated mode of being in relation to itself. Here I lean in on liberal claims that liberalism truth is horizontal, coming, promissory, and dynamic. In so far as it is, liberalism is itself always illusive. The early scholarship on recognition made this, if nothing else, very clear. The need felt by liberal states and publics to debate whether this or that social



group or culture should be recognized, as Charles Taylor put it, not merely for “the equal value of all humans potentially” but “the equal value of what they have made of this potential in fact,” conserves liberal forms of reason (Taylor 1994, pp. 42-43). The great world historical difference of communicative reason, the foundation of liberal democratic orders, according to Jurgen Habermas, is that the ground and horizon, the facts and the norms, are in constant motion. What were assumed to be facts are shown to have been for some unintended misunderstandings and for others strategic misrecognitions of their own desires to take from others by characterizing them as lesser than themselves (Habermas 1996). Anytime you catch liberalism being wrong, it shifts, often through one or another form of *mea culpa*. Some theorists see this as the great world historical good of liberalism; it will always correct its course. For many others it demonstrates that no amount of death and suffering will ever dent its hubris. At every moment, great swaths of the earth know that they will have been an unintended mistake for which many apologies will be made.

Not only is liberalism, and thus late liberalism, structurally belated to its own good, as a consequence of this, liberalism is only ever citational and diasporic; diffused and tactical; heterogeneous and pocked; multi-dimensionally incommensurate (see also, Lea 2020). Multiple strategic responses to the effective uprisings against liberal civilizational paternalism, such as late liberal forms of recognition did not unify the west nor produce a uniform liberal solution – the fiction of a unified or uniform liberalism is a strategy of making coherence from incoherence. As numerous comparative sociological and ethnographic monographs have shown, the specific enactment of what we place under the general rubric of “liberal recognition” reveals liberalism to be a diasporic form, a unity and singularity only through discursive citation.

By the time I was addressing the logic of late liberal recognition, primarily focused in and on the settler colonial liberalism, the heat of the progressive scholarly work had shifted as wave after cooptative wave washed over activist struggles. What to do when a feminist and queer critique of marriage morphed into a movement for gay marriage? When a critique of race and capitalism led to movement to diversify the workforce? When Indigenous refusal to be dispossessed from their lands and the relations of obligation they have with the more than human world in them was transformed by what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls “the white possessive” (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Rather than exclude oth-

ers, late liberalism wraps its tendrils around them. Brown commons, Indigenous refusal, sexual self-outlawing, and radical trans-plasticity: all seek to maneuver around or confront the corrosive juices of absorptive late liberalism. By *Economies of Abandonment*, I thought it best to unpack recognition into three aspects – recognition, espionage, and camouflage – and to begin to recon with a new mutation of liberalisms around whiteness, a mutation that sometimes appears as militant whiteness, but insofar as it feeds off a wounded whiteness is something much different (for wounded attachment, see Brown 1993). It is the abstract subject of liberalism always looked like.

As scholars attempted to get ahead or out from under late liberal recognition, some worked to change the presumption that the deracinated human was the ultimate source and object of reflection. Sylvia Wynter, Paul Gilroy, Denise Ferreira da Silva and others working out from the Black Atlantic insist that a different genealogy of human and humanism must be written before any discussion of what a post-racist recognition might entail (Wynter 2003; Gilroy 2014; da Silva 2007). Mel Chen, using Michael Silverstein technical work in linguistic metapragmatics, has unpacked structures of race and gender normativity animating the animism hierarchy (Chen 2012). In the North American context, Kim Tallbear, Zoe Todd, Glen Coulthard, Jodi Byrd and other First Nation and Native American scholars began probing the powers of other forms of relationality not via the frozen idea of traditions that late liberalism demanded, but through the struggles of the ancestral present – human and non-human struggles – whose aim is to put to rest the ghoulish settler skeletons rampaging across the earth (Tallbear 2017; Todd 2017; Coulthard 2014; Byrd 2020).

The rise of white militancy in the wake of decolonial critique is more evidence that the long arm of geontopower, long operating in the open in Atlantic and Pacific settler colonies and distinct from the drama and grip of biopower, has lost its grip differentiate geontopower from biopower. Geontopower is not situated within the power of life but in the power to distinguish nonlife (geos) and being (ontology). Geontopower subtends the late liberal governance of difference and markets. Geontopower is not a power that is only just now emerging to replace biopolitics; biopower (the governance through life and death) has long depended on a subtending geontopower (the difference between the lively and the inert). And, similarly to Achille Mbembe's argument that necropolitics operated openly in colonial Africa only later to unravel its form within fascist

Europe, my argument is that geontopower has long operated openly in settler late liberalism, insinuating itself in the ordinary operations of its governance of difference and markets. The attribution of an inability of various colonized peoples to differentiate the kinds of things that a geontological imaginary invested with that agency, subjectivity, and intentionality has been the grounds of casting them into a premodern mentality and a post-recognition difference. Geontopower works within the history of colonialism and recognition by superimposing the division of Life and Nonlife onto a hierarchy of being – caught in all its casually formative power in the characteristic of Indigenous Australians as Stone Age people. The purpose, then, of the concept of geontopower is not to found a new ontology of objects, nor to establish a new metaphysics of power, nor to adjudicate the possibility or impossibility of the human ability to know the truth of the world of things. Rather, it is a concept meant to help make visible the figural tactics of late liberalism as a long-standing biontological orientation and distribution of power crumbles, losing its efficacy as a self-evident backdrop to reason.

As the politics of difference and recognition are placed with the cracking grid of geontopower, propelled by the relentless critique outlined above, four axioms of existence that have emerged in recent years across a significant section of critical theory (for geontopower, see Povinelli 2016). They are: the entanglement of existence; the unequal distribution of power to affect the local and transversal terrains of this entanglement; the multiplicity and collapse of the event as the *sine qua non* of political thought; and the provincial racial and colonial history that informed liberal western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the west as such. Although I treat these axioms as distinct theoretical statements, they are in fact part of a much broader discursive surface of political thought and action arising in the wake of geontopower. The current rise of illiberal xenophobic liberalism, zero-interest capitalism, and ecofascism concurrent with the collapse of a unipolar American US power may be signaling a new reorganization of liberalism. Thus, we must pay attention not merely to emergent forms of critique but to the syntax of their arrangement if we are to avoid their them being co-opted into late liberal and illiberal capitalism. Whatever we think about these axioms we must think of them as a set of actions supporting or disrupting the conservation of late liberal power.

*Four axioms of existence*

Over the last few decades, critical theory, or a large segment of it, has migrated from interpretive and hermeneutic approaches to social life and from discourses and practices of life, to approaches centered on the ontology of existence in which life and nonlife sit. In other words, the problematics of biopower – whether approach as a positive or negative form; as irreducibly related to the necropolitical; or a shorthand for the play of immunity and community and the dialectics of plasticity – has given way to what is often called the ontological turn. In anthropology, this turn is best known through Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's concept of multiperspectivism or through the long shadow of Marilyn Strathern who argued that nonwestern cultural understandings of existence were equivalent to western philosophical claims (de Castro 2009; Strathern 1995; see also, Descola 2013; Kohn 2013). Scholars inside and outside of anthropology have also been influenced by feminist and queer theorists and science and technological studies – Donna Haraway's symbiogenetic and Barad's physics based approach to entangled existence as well as the work of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour (Haraway 2008; Barad 2007; Stengers 2018; Latour 1993). Across this divergent and sometime acrimonious discursive field is a shared procedural approach to questions of difference. All begin with the nature of (all) existence whether this nature is revealed through interventions in the natural sciences or the analytics of a group of people. Even scholars seeking to make Indigenous understandings of existence of equal value to western philosophical understandings treat Indigenous knowledges as if in the same mode as western forms; they abstract the knowledge from a specific history in order to create a general account of existence. As I just suggested this abstraction and universalization seems to be motivated by desire to make Indigenous analytics equivalent to Western philosophical approaches.

It is from within these debates that a new axiom of existence has emerged within critical theory, namely, that existence is entangled. As I, and many others, have noted the claim that existence is entangled is also a claim about the nature of objects, forces, and habits. It is not that things are entangled in existence, but that existence is entangled in itself. Existence is like a huge ball of string – forces – that has been bent and folded into and around itself in such a way that what we take as an object is a moment of habituated densities within these folds or *pli* (Deleuze 1988). Thus, objects are only ever thingish, hereish, nowish et cetera. Objects are merely moment of objectivation in the manner in which Foucault understood sub-

jection, namely, the tactics and procedures of power that provide the conditions for thought of the self as a specific form of subjectivity. Objectivation is not reserved to human modes of knowing in or abstracted from human modalities of power. The folds that are misrecognized as objects are created by existence's relation to itself including within it human and more-than-human worlds – existence is first human procedures of discernment, recognition and interpretation second. Another way of visualizing the nature of entangled existence would be to appropriate Lacan's concept of the psychic extimate and apply it to the nature of materiality. The intimate inside of every *thing* is external to it – what something is is not within itself but at distance from itself. Take human breathing. The material extimacy of human animals is not merely in its the symbiotic relation to plants, but to the ongoing toxic externalizations of extractive and consumptive (pun intended) capitalism including its foundational distinctions between Life and Nonlife long grounding disciplinary differentiations of biology and geology get in way as much as they might ever clarify.

The example of breathing takes leads us to the second axiom – the observation that in such as entangled existence the ability to exert agency over the entanglement depends on where, how and what other folds of force objectivate you. In the US, the political cry, Eric Garner's ultimately unsuccessful plea to police officer Daniel Pantaleo to kneeling on his neck, "I can't breathe" is a powerful, tragic example of the differentials of material and social entanglements. The social distributions of breath in the US are hardly new nor restricted to the policing apparatus. Henry Dumas's 1968 short story, "Goodbye Sweetwater," is situated in a fictive southern town being slowly buried in the toxic white toxic dust of a bauxite mine and concrete factory. The dust from the trucks, cars, and factories that "had spread over the land like a creeping fever" is not mere metaphor for the toxic nature of white supremacy, but the actual sedimentations of its poisons across ecological landscapes choking trees, waters and Black families first and foremost, but also seeping into the psychic strategies of resistance and refusal (Dumas, 1974).

Dumas was himself shot to death by a New York City subway transit police officer in 1968 at the age of thirty-three. The official reason for the shooting was authored and controlled by the police department. His writing and life show the knotted sedimentations of human and more-thanhuman matter and discourse. The grids of racial and gendered intelligibility are simultaneously linguistic and material – the who or what one is and thus

how one can and should be treated is constantly, although not necessarily simultaneously, in the air, so to speak, in the ways that, sediments of force are managed and manage to escape this management. Dumas produced a counter-discourse to the very forces that had an ultimately deadly agency. In doing so he left a discursive sedimentation for future Black writers, activists, and their allies to remobilize. Dumas appears to see this in the refusal of nature itself to be swallowed by the avarice of white supremacy. Speaking of a sweet water spring hidden in old plantation grounds, Dumas has his protagonist Layton reflect,

He noticed that the spirt was thinner than it was yesterday. He wondered if anyone else besides the Negroes who lived near the spring had discovered it. It wouldn't be long before the government found out that it had sweet water on its plantation. By then the spring would disappear and come up again somewhere else (Dumas, pp. 245-246).

In this way we grasp the relevance of the approach that pragmatist William James took to mental life. What James sought to show how the powers of belief and doubt are determined by the complex energetics of social fields and relations. Indeed, for James, power as such can be measured by the ability of one region to seize hold of habituated practices across regions, forestalling other possibilities that are in existence from taking hold and extending themselves. In *The Principles of Psychology* James critiques those for whom “the higher faculties of the mind are pure products of ‘experience;’ and experience is supposed to be of something simply given.” Instead, “experience is what I agree” to or am forced “to attend to” (James 1950, p. 402) Because concept formation, like other mental practices, demands an effort, those who are constantly exhausted by the extractive machinery of capital are given a double task. On the one hand, they must carve effort from their world even as others are sucking as much energy from it as they can in order to enrich themselves. On the other hand, they must focus their effort on social analysis.

These forms of extimate social entanglement have altered how the political event is conceptualized. The political event is no longer conceived as only that which structurally transforms a given arrangement of existence with potentially universal reach whether by a subjective act of fidelity, a structural alteration of social relations, or the emergence of a new arrangement of the sensible. Political events are now seen as registering in small, micro, and quasi forms in one region or another of the entanglement; and the political often expresses itself as intensities without events or even-

tualities, what Paul Gilroy called “politics at a lower frequency” (Gilroy 1993, p. 37). Because of the uneven nature and variability of social forces within a given morphology of entanglement (assemblage) what registers as transformation in one region doesn’t another, what is experienced as large here is as of yet small to nonexistent there. The bauxite mine tailings covering the land and polluting the landscape in “Goodbye Sweetwater” manifest as clear skies elsewhere. In other words, the change in our understanding of the political is not a new understanding of what counts as a structural change with universal reach but an undermining of the ontology of existence that supported this possibility. From the perspective of axioms one and two there is no one moment, decision, or event because there is no *at any given time*. Strains in one region of existence register with massive or subtle seismic effects depending one where one is located, how this area is supported or not, and how the historical treatment of the region has already created microfractures throughout. The different habituated zonings of entangled existence affect each other as if by ghostly action at a distance. But what may be experienced as ghostly causes and effects are, however, simply the result of how one region is composed by forces far afield and yet intimately internal to its ability to hold itself in place – or like the sweet water, hide and relocate itself away from the catastrophe of white capitalism.

At this point the relevance of the syntactic arrangement of these first three axioms should be clear, and the nested assumptions about the hierarchy of ontology, sociology, and politics revealed by this syntax. The first axiom sets an ontological ground in which social conditions, the second axiom, are organized, and thus political maneuver, the third axiom, are or are not possible. Of course, no one makes these syntactic relations more explicit and theoretically clear than Judith Butler’s distinction between precariousness and precarity. Butler argues that all humans share an ontologically grounded vulnerability. These shared conditions are, however, socially differentiated not merely in who and what can be killed and murdered but what murders and killings can be grieved. The politics of grievability, or black killability, from Dumas the person to Black Lives Matter as a political movement, are, in other words, immanent to an ontologically transcendental condition. The general claim holds true for everyone everywhere; it is universally true. How it is actualized in the social world is specifically true. These specificities provide the materiality of politics – the how, what, and why of a movement of reforming and redistributing the common.

This hierarchy of forms and modes of existence – ontology leads to sociology leads to politics – is often shorthand. We say, existence is entangled as if the other two axioms simply unfold from this statement. But the fourth axiom inserts a wobble into the smooth rotation of this nested hierarchy. The fourth axiom can be stated in this way. The provincial racial and colonial history that informed liberal western ontologies and epistemologies and the concept of the west as such must not merely be provincialized but seen as, on the one hand, a back formation for the justification of colonial dispossession and enslavement, and on the other hand, implicated in the means by which existence has been ravaged. In other words, it is not any ontology per se or scientific approach to biology and geology per se that is at stake. It is that the procedures by which we produce these separations and hierarchical relations are within the discourses and practices of geontopower. Thus, the solution is not to find a better ontology or to treat ontology as if it were everything and before everything. The solution may be instead to alter the syntactic arrangement of these axioms in such a way that they collapse the ontological and epistemological habit of late liberalism. Glissant's *Poetics of Relations*, in distinction to Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy*, suggests what is at stake (Glissant 1997; Deleuze and Guattari 1994). The three abysses that opened in the hull of the slave ship and the lands of Indigenous dispossession created specific, unfolding, and decisive relations between Europeans in their diaspora, West Africans, Indigenous and Pacific people and eventually everywhere. In other words, axiom four insists we start in the relations of liberalism and capitalism that began to unfold from the belly of those ships. Three aspects of liberalism are altered when we start with axiom four. First when we start with the historical sedimentary relationality rather than de-racinated and abstracted questions of the nature of being, we remain in the ancestral present. We no longer are involved in a politics of recognition that pivots on time and the other, but the enduring creative manner in which history manifests as sedimentations rather than temporality. Second, the question of control of common goods, and what such commons goods are – whether they are things or relatives – are placed at the front and center. We stay within the routes and worlds created by the motion of the extraction machinery of capitalism and the way they terraform existence as they encrust ears and eyes so no one can hear or see the human and more than human terror they produce. Third, we don't unintentionally reproduce the very orders of being and knowing that we state are the grounds of the problem.

I do not pretend that the inversion and reordering of the four axioms that I am suggesting are inconsequential or uncontroversial from a philosophical point of view. Indeed, they might appear as incoherent claims from



such a perspective. I could be read as asserting, for instance, that before these histories of colonization existence was not entangled. Or I could be called out for opposing ontological claims even as all of my work seeks to lend energy to various Indigenous and subaltern claims about non-Western ontologies. For now, let me simply note, in relation to both worries, that both criticisms are correct even as they miss the point. If I were interested in existence as such or ontology as such then a massive incoherence would subtend this exercise. But I am not interested in either of these as such, that is, as if they could be abstracted out and said to exist outside of existence. Where is existence other than in existence? Where is being other than in being? More crucially who can believe without the slightest irritation of doubt that the figuring of existence as some sort of abstract something somehow neutralizes the specific historical contours of Black and Indigenous lives? Who can act as if this should be the first and final concern?

### *Heritability and recognition*

I have been working on a project that I sometimes call the Inheritance Project, the Disinheritance Project and the Heritability Project. Each of these titles frame a different aspect of what is simple in its form and purpose. The Project tracks the fate of a set of clans in the wake of western forms of freedom, white supremacy, and settler colonialism – my own Simonaz clan of Povinellis from Carisolo, Trentino and the clans of the Karrabing Film Collective from the coasts of the Top End of the NT, Australia. The project uses a series of rhyming historical events, images, and ecological alterations to demonstrate how perhaps initially similar subnational, family and clan-based modes of belonging to land its more-than-human worlds are diverted as they are differentially folded into the unrelenting infrastructures of colonialism and racism. The purpose is to get ahead of and around right white nativisms sprouting up everywhere though differently depending if your situated in the US, EU, New Zealand, or Australia, all places that clans from my village left for starting in the 1870s just years after Darwin was established as the first British colony in the far Australian north.

The Heritability Project suggests some methodological and conceptual interventions to how we might reapproach the late liberal politics of recognition when this politics is situated within the inverted logic of the four axioms of existence. We can start with a methodological intervention. If we abide by the normative syntax of the four axioms, we might be tempted

to begin by asking how ontological conditions were socially manifested in Simonaz Povinelli and Karrabing clans – how did they understand the nature of existence as an entangled relation between the human and more-than-human world. In the Simonaz case, we could ask precrisotological ontological frameworks were left as traces in archive, memory, and genetics such as, in the case of genetics, we can demonstrate how cows were bred to thrive at high altitudes. We would focus on this biological inheritance as one node in an entangled existence (Senczuk et al. 2020; Raffaetà 2021). A similar process could be undertaken with Karrabing clan, with the obvious substitution of ecology of flora and fauna. These two abstracted ontological and multiperspectival histories would then be placed alongside each other, a politics of recognition based on shared histories of precolonial modes of sustainable relationality between humans and the more-than-human world.

But a methodology that begins with axiom four would instead track the warp and weft of these clans as they came to be spatially and corporeally expressed through colonial history. Instead of beginning the analysis at the moment when the archive suggests Povinelli transformed from a nickname to lineage surname between 1494 and 1572, we would begin with the dates of 1788/1801.

It was on January 26, 1788 that the first fleet of nine transport ships arrived at Sydney Cove from British penal harbors to dump their human cargo onto the lands of the Gadigal, Wangal, Wallumedegal, Boromedegal, Gamaragal, Borogegal, Birrabirragal and Gayamaygal. This began the long and ongoing material and discursive Indigenous struggle against settler invasion, first justified on the basis of terra nullius, then paternal civilization-alism, and more recently cultural recognition. 1801 marks Napoleon's trek across the Alps. And, from the perspective of the Simonaz clan, the year the tradition of *carte di regola* for Trentino villages was abolished. The *carte di regola* was an institution of patrifamilial (*capifamiglia*) based rights of self-governance of *vicini* over who could and how they could use community lands and resources. Napoleon said he was also carting modern civilization military his military lumbered over the Alps. Hegel claimed he was bringing more than that – that Bonaparte was the historical personification of *Geist* unfolding universal mutual human recognition as he bombed his way across Europe. The *Geist* Napoleon and Hegel supported had a limit – liberty, fraternity, and equality presupposed a hierarchy of Life, its absolute difference from Nonlife, and its pinnacle as occupied by European Man. The liberation of Man had a universal reach only if the Haitians struggling

for freedom under the wing of Toussaint L'Ouverture were expelled from the human (James 1938/1980; Buck-Morss 2009). The Haitian Revolution like the numerous fights of First Nations against colonial dispossession made clear, if clarity was still needed, that the grid of intelligibility was organized not on ontology but dispossession.

Another series of other parallel dates would demonstrate, on the one hand, how heritability is a problem and process by which some are able to forge and maintain a relation to locality based on their ability to maintain the pragmatic analytics subtending it; and what forms and relations of dispossession commence when they are no longer able to do so. On the other hand, we might demonstrate how these differentials of power work as a history of material and mental sedimentation. Take, for example, the two dates of 1869 and 1870. The first is the date that the settlement of Darwin was established on the shores of Larrakia lands. Darwin was the first settler foothold in the British coastal invasion of the far north of the Australian continent. The settler population was quite small some 135 British men and women. The founding corresponding to the arrival of the Australian Overland Telegraph Line from Port Augusta in 1870. No matter its size the ramifications of the settlement were felt along the coast as settlers shot and poison Indigenous people as they appropriated their lands. A totem in Karrabing lands sent a plague of flesh-eating flies in response, memorialized in *Mermaids, or Aiden in Wonderland* (2018). In 1870, faced with increased mortality rates as private property ate through common lands, the Simonaz clan began dragging their knife-grinding wheels across the Atlantic into Seneca lands (Buffalo, New York). By the end of the First World War, having been dispossessed of their own lands, the Simonaz clan had departed to the dispossessed worlds of others, to the US, some to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

As these two sets of clans move into 1964 and 1967 the sedimentary consequences of these forms and modes of dispossession grew even larger. In 1964 a fragment of the Simonaz clan, my natal family, moved to Shreveport, Louisiana, located within Caddo Parish. The actual Caddo were forcibly removed to Oklahoma in 1859, ten years before Darwin was settled, and about forty years before my family began moving out of Carisolo and onto the lands of the Seneca (Buffalo, New York). Shreveport was the last capital of the Southern Confederacy; Caddo Parish one of the most notorious lynching regions in the US South. The fragment of Simonaz took up residence there the same year that the US passed the Civil and Voting Rights Acts meant to overturn the entrenched racial discrimi-

nation in schooling, public access, and voting. The conditions that Henry Dumas narrative in “Goodbye Sweetwater” and other short stories were not in short supply in Shreveport. Industrial agricultural toxins covered the cotton fields and spread across the landscape on the winds and into the soil with the rains. As the Simonaz children carried forward their ancestral foraging traditions, substituting crawfish, snapping turtles, and blackberries for their grandparents’ mushrooms, blueberries, and rabbits, the police were violently attacking Black protestors in the racially segregated city.

In 1967 the Australian voting public, overwhelming white and British, voted on two specific changes to the Australian constitution. Voters were asked to approve, on the one hand, granting the Australian federal government the right to make special laws for all races rather than excluding “the aboriginal race in any State.” This change allowed the federal government to pass the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, 1976*, the first peg in what would become a late liberal response to Indigenous demands for the return of their lands. On the other hand, voters were asked to approve the removal of a section of the constitution that excluded “aboriginal natives” from the census, an administrative mode of manufacturing *terra nullius*. All of this was occurring while Karrabing ancestors continued to tell their children the ancestral history of their lands interned as wards of the state in a small settlement named Delissaville.

### *In conclusion*

This essay has examined the politics of late liberal settler recognition from the perspective four axioms of existence and from an overview of an ongoing project about the fate of two sets of clans in the wake of colonialism. At this point it should be clear that the way I framed the literature on recognition was meant to lead us to what I consider a more pressing issue, namely, how should we reckon with four axioms of existence that have emerged in the wake of geontopower. My reasoning is that what were the discursive conditions that gave rise to altered in significant way as anthropocenic climate has forced western to experience the toxic effect of the processes of dispossession at the root of their accumulation. The Heritability Project attempts to understand how cultural recognition increasingly turned inward and nativist within the European diaspora exemplifies both the problem with the current syntax of these axioms and an alternative conceptual and methodological approach that emerges when we invert this syntax.

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# RECOGNITION, IDENTITY, AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE BLUES

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## *Abstract*

This paper analyses issues of recognition, identity, and authenticity in connection with blues music, blackness and whiteness. Using conceptualizations from recognition theory, the discussion begins by raising some fundamental problems encountered in the troubled cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene. The two positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism are then distinguished, characterized, and critically discussed, while looking at some relevant examples from the literature. As its constructive contribution, the paper concludes by suggesting that musical ideas should be recognized in similar fashion to scholarly ones, that is, by respecting and crediting the original sources, while openly utilizing and freely developing them into further directions.

*Keywords:* Recognition, Blues music, Cultural identity, Authenticity, Race.

## *1. Problematizing Blues, Blackness, and Whiteness*

Upon hearing that I, as a middle-aged white guy, had started to take lessons to learn to play the guitar, and that my foremost musical interest was in the blues, some of my researcher colleagues at the university acted surprised, and commented that shouldn't I rather be interested in things like country and Johnny Cash, because this was white music, and blues was black. I, in turn, was myself surprised and puzzled by these seemingly stereotyped comments, as I had indeed always thought of blues as black music, but at the same time not felt in any way that the music itself would or should somehow be the sole property of, or limited to black people alone. Later on, during one of my guitar lessons, my teacher suggested that if I really wanted to get to the root of things, I should turn to the original black blues players, and try to learn their technique and style. He also mentioned in passing that nowadays, the blues scene is almost totally dominated by white people. While then attending various international blues festivals with my wife, I came across dif-

ferent views connected with the issue of blues and race. The topic was also variously discussed in the blues literature (Charters 1959; Cohn 1993; Gioia 2008; Palmer 1981; Tilton 1994; Wald 2004, 2010) that I studied to gain a deeper understanding of the music.

All this left me feeling that there is something important and problematic here, but I couldn't really articulate clearly enough to myself at the time how to think about the topic. When I then came across and read Adam Gussow's (2020) recent monograph, *Whose Blues? Facing Up to Race and the Future of the Music*, I thought that it is time to try, at least initially, to systematize my own thoughts around the topic. This paper is the result of that initial attempt. Although I shall rely on a wider scope of sources, at the center of my attention throughout will be Gussow's book, and in particular Corey Harris's *Blues is Black music!* blog, especially its inaugural post "Can White People Play the Blues?" (Harris 2015a). In the latter, many of the central issues are concisely formulated and clearly expressed. Harris's post has provoked a lot of commentary, and for our purposes, it provides a useful reference point in the literature.<sup>1</sup>

Before proceeding any further, I shall resort to two metaphors that serve to set the stage for the ensuing discussion. I am terming these metaphors by their authors as 'Harris's Tree' (Harris 2015a) and 'Lomax's River' (Lomax 1993). They go as follows:

*Harris's Tree:* Black music is that tree that is always growing. Africa is the root, the blues is the trunk and the other styles from jazz to gospel, rock n' roll and hip-hop are the branches.

*Lomax's River:* To the black people of the Delta, who created a Mississippi of song that now flows through the music of the whole world.<sup>2</sup>

The rooty and earthy metaphors of a tree and a river are both dynamic in nature, for the tree is always growing and the river keeps flowing. One thing that arguably distinguishes Harris's Tree from Lomax's River, however, is that although both explicitly refer to blackness, the former posits black music as a tree-like solid individual entity with a relatively clear identity, while the latter is based on a more fluid and less discernible identity of a flowing water. In Harris's Tree, blues is depicted as a particular

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1 Throughout this paper, I shall be operating with unproblematized notions of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. For more philosophical discussion concerning the nature of race, see Glasgow *et al.* (2019).

2 The term 'Lomax's River' is derived from his book dedication.

concrete trunk that you can bump into, while in Lomax's River, the 'Mississippi of song' created by the black people of the Delta now flows universally and freely through the music of the whole world.

It is important to note that both metaphors are fully compatible with recognizing the history and origin of the blues as dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, and being forged in the black experience in the Southern United States (or partially even earlier in Africa, cf. e.g. Gioia 2008, pp. 1-17). However, they do seem to paint significantly differing pictures of the contemporary blues scene, where what was once perceived as an African American art, is now often conceived as a less racialized form of global popular music (cf. Pearson 2014, pp. *xi, xiii*). Lomax's River seems to readily accommodate and even directly depict the contemporary situation of diffusion, while Harris's Tree appears more insistent on a fixed and trunk-like identity of the blues as essentially black music with roots in Africa.<sup>3</sup> The dynamic temporal dimension is central for creating the problematizations of this paper, because the process by which blues shifted from a black vernacular tradition to global popular music (Pearson 2014, p. *xi*; cf. Daley 2003, p. 163) is precisely the historical development with whose consequences we are currently grappling. With the two metaphors in place, we have a launching pad for articulating some of the fundamental problems encountered in the lived experience and cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene.

## 2. *Blues and Adequate Recognition*

Metaphors are ways of thinking about something. In discussing some of the crucial problems of "the troubled cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene", as Gussow (2020, p. 5) puts it, I shall in the following rely on further conceptualizations from recognition theory (see e.g., Honneth 1995; Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007). Having worked with this theoretical framework before (e.g. Koskinen 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), my suggestion would be that many of the relevant problematic issues directly concern the topic of *adequate recognition*. In other words, the fundamental question is who gets to recognize some object as something, and whether this act of recognition is adequate or not.

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3 Perhaps this difference could be expected, as Harris (2015a) states that "Your answer depends on where you stand in the debate". On the other hand, in the book dedication from which Lomax's River is derived, he is *not* denying the history of the music and the people, but making explicit reference, and giving credit to it instead.

On a more general philosophical level (cf. Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007), recognition can be seen as a *relation* with the following three components: the subject or recognizer ‘*A*’; the object or what is recognized ‘*B*’; and the content or *as what* something is recognized ‘*X*’. Thus, we get the basic *A-B-X* form of recognition-relations, where someone (*A*) recognizes some object (*B*) as something (*X*). Recognition-relations, or their lack, can also be *contested* or judged *inadequate*, because not all acts of recognition are acceptable to the recipient, or to some other third parties. This brings in questions of *power*, and the issues of (i) who gets to be the recognizing *subject* that (ii) chooses some *object* for recognition, and (iii) determines the *content* of the act of recognition. All three issues related to power are also highly relevant when thinking about recognition, identity, and authenticity in the blues.

In particular, we can focus on the following three interrelated problems prominent in the discussion:

BR1: The identity of the blues

BR2: The misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians

BR3: The question of whether white musicians can authentically play the blues

To say something about why I take all three to be issues of blues recognition, or ‘BR’ for short, let me point out that in ordinary language, the word ‘recognition’ has at least three different uses or meanings (cf. Ikäheimo & Laitinen 2007). In the first sense of *identification*, ‘recognition’ can mean taking something as the individual thing it is, as a thing with some particular features, or as belonging to a certain kind. This meaning is obviously significant for discussing the identity of the blues. In the second sense of *acknowledgement*, ‘recognition’ is applicable to normative entities, as in taking norms, principles, rules, or claims as valid, reasons as good, values as genuine, and so forth. This meaning comes into play when we are discussing evaluative judgements, including those of authenticity, in connection with the blues. In the third sense paradigmatic to recognition theory, ‘recognition’ means *mutual recognition between persons*, as in taking someone as a person, as a rational being, or as one of us. This third meaning is pertinent for example to the question of whether black and white blues musicians are treated equally in the business.

Within the third paradigmatic sense of taking someone as a person, we may further distinguish three different species of recognition that are central to the contemporary theory-formation (cf. Honneth 1995). The first one

is *respect*, which is based on what we are, our shared humanity, and our equal dignity as persons. The second one is *esteem*, which is based on who we are, namely persons of a certain kind, with particular identities, capabilities, contributions, and unequal merits. The third one is *love*, friendship, or emotional support, which is based on being a certain unique individual person, and on the unequal personal significance between individuals. All of these different meanings and dimensions of recognition are variously intertwined in the morality, ethics, and cultural politics of the contemporary blues scene. On present occasion, I shall try to point out at least some of the ways in which they are systematically connected with the questions BR1–BR3 of blues recognition articulated above.

Arguably, problem BR1 regarding the *identity* of the blues presents a foundational question. This is true e.g. in the sense that BR1 inevitably has an effect on how we think about the other two issues of BR2 and BR3. The foundational nature of BR1 becomes especially clear as we focus on the assumed role of *blackness* in characterizing the nature of the blues. The question ‘What is blues?’ or ‘How is the identity of the blues defined?’ can be seen as the problem of adequately recognizing (in the sense of identifying) the blues. If blues is indeed taken to be essentially black music, then this appears to have immediate consequences for BR2, and interpretations of the misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians. The same goes for BR3, and the question of whether white musicians can authentically play the blues. If we assume that due to its very identity, blues is essentially (or by definition) black music, and therefore only playable authentically by black people, then this apparently puts an end to any further discussion concerning BR3.

Regarding problem BR2 concerning the *misrecognition* and *non-recognition* of black blues musicians (cf. e.g., Opening Plenary 2012; Blues Foundation 2019a, 2019b), it should be pointed out that the term ‘misrecognition’ is intended to implicate that some *A* recognizes some black blues musician *B* as *X* in a way that is not considered adequate or appropriate either by the recipient *B*, or by some other third party observing the relational *A-B-X* act of recognition. The term ‘non-recognition’, then, is intended to implicate that there is a complete lack or absence of recognition, adequate or otherwise. While we are engaged in conceptualizing the issue BR2 in recognition-theoretical terms, it should also be observed that we can think about the misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians in at least two different ways based on the distinct species of recognition articulated above. On the one hand, we can think about the mis- and non-recognition in the dimension of *respect* as

a matter of shared humanity and equal treatment. On the other hand, we can think about the mis- and non-recognition of black blues musicians as an issue of *esteem*, which takes us to particular identities, capabilities, contributions, and unequal merits. This latter sense obviously connects with Harris's (2015a) claim that "There would be no blues without Black people, and Black people still set the standard by which all other players and singers are measured."

By now, it should have become very clear that our answer to question BR3 about whether white musicians can authentically play the blues is closely and systematically tied to the preceding issues of BR1 and BR2. If blackness has an essential or definitional role in the very *identity* of blues music, and if black people are especially *esteemed* as both the originators and standard-setters of the blues, then it seems that the authenticity of white blues musicians is at a serious disadvantage to begin with. Moreover, as the special esteem of black blues musicians is so strongly connected with the assumed black identity of the music, we should carefully focus on BR1 and the way in which we characterize the identity of the blues.

### 3. Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism

In thus focusing on the identity of the blues and the question of what blues is, we can distinguish two opposing positions. These are based on the metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River that we began with in Section 1. The two suggested positions are also closely connected with the pair of ideologies that Gussow (2020, p. 2) distinguishes in his book. As we may remember, Harris's Tree appears insistent on a fixed and trunk-like identity of the blues as essentially or definitionally<sup>4</sup> black music with roots in Africa. Gussow terms this ideology 'black bluesism', and states that it comes with a ready-made slogan, which he borrows from Harris: '*Blues is black music!*'. Lomax's River, on the other hand, seems to readily accommodate and depict the actual diffusion in the contemporary blues scene. Gussow calls this ideology 'blues universalism', and associates it with the slogan '*No black. No white. Just the blues.*'<sup>5</sup>

4 Harris does not use the *essential* versus *definitional* distinction. This is my terminology intended to suggest that in an ontological sense, we can take either a *realistically* or a *linguistically* oriented approach to the whole issue of defining what blues is.

5 This latter slogan, Gussow (2020, p. 3) points out, is a familiar T-shirt meme on Beale Street in Memphis in the mid-1990s, which has later survived and

The ‘black bluesism’ that Gussow contrasts with ‘blues universalism’ is in effect a form of *blues particularism*, even if we did, on empirical and historical grounds, take the conceptual possibility of ‘white bluesism’ to be a non-starter as far as blues ideologies go. To suggest what can be seen as a slightly more adequate contrast on the same philosophical level of abstraction, we might then attempt to distinguish and preliminarily characterize the two opposing positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism thus:

*Black Blues Particularism:* The blues is, essentially or by definition, tied to the particular human feature of blackness, black culture, and the particular black historical origins and social conditions that created the blues.

*Blues Universalism:* The blues is, essentially or by definition, a genre of music that is formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and freely transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another.

Regarding our problems BR1–BR3, Black Blues Particularism ties the *identity* of the blues to blackness, grants special blues *esteem* to black people and culture, and answers the question of whether white musicians can *authentically* play the blues in the negative. Gussow (2020, p. 62) expresses this sentiment as follows:

[B]lues isn’t just a musical form, a set of lyrics and sounds and instrumental techniques that anybody can master, and it isn’t just a feeling. It’s a specifically *racial* feeling, one grounded in the painful particulars of the black experience. Since whites don’t share that experience, either historically or existentially (i.e., in the present day), they can’t possibly play the music for real. They’re just appropriating, mimicking, pretending.

In opposition to such Black Blues Particularism, Blues Universalism takes blues music to be formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and as such, a cultural creation that is transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another one without restriction. Blues Universalism also accordingly tries to answer the BR1 problem of the identity of the blues in more abstract, general, formal, or purely musical terms<sup>6</sup> without anchoring blues essentially or definitionally to any particular ex-

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prospered.

6 It is interesting to note in this connection the difficulties of finding any one specific feature with which to answer the question of what blues is, as usefully demonstrated by Elijah Wald (2004, pp. 3-13; 2010, pp. 1-7).

tra-musical context. One might then say that the very possibility of Blues Universalism is based on the acceptability of the idea that blues music can be abstracted or lifted out of its particular cultural, historical, and social context. Consequently, this *contextual transferability* seems to be the philosophically central issue that distinguishes and also gives contrastive significance to the two opposing positions. If Blues Universalism and its contextual transferability are accepted, then the *identity* of blues cannot be defined in particularistic terms, the BR2 issue of mis- and non-recognition of black blues musicians becomes more emphatically a question of respect-recognition and *equality* of treatment, and the BR3 problem of *authenticity* remains to be solved by other means than blackness, whether understood as a particular human feature, culture, history, or social condition.

The central issue thus seems to be whether blues has an essential or identity-defining connection to blackness, as Black Blues Particularism assumes, or whether blues is freely transferable from black contexts to other ones, as Blues Universalism presupposes. Although we will not presently dig very deeply into the questions of blackness and race themselves (cf. e.g. Glasgow et. al. 2019), it is interesting to note how Harris (2015a, 2015b) characterizes blackness. He insists on several occasions that the issue is *not* (or at least not *only*) about skin color or race, but rather about the culture and history of a people. Blackness, Harris (2015b) states, is more than just a matter of skin color. In his formulation it is also “a heritage, a history, a way of eating, speaking, fighting, loving, cooking, worshipping and making music”. He (2015a) also insists that “Without culture there is no music. Music is the voice of a culture. Separate the two and the music can never be the same.”, and even more concisely, “take the Black element out of the blues and it is not the same thing” (2015b). These would seem to be relatively clear expressions of Black Blues Particularism.

However, we should also notice that Harris’s formulations seem to leave open the question of how rigidly his version of Black Blues Particularism or BBP is to be understood. A lot seems to hang on how we should understand blues without the black element being “not the same thing”. In a more *rigid* reading of BBP, blackness is essential or definitional to the blues in the sense that if blackness is taken out of the blues, then whatever we have left, is not, and cannot by its very nature, or by definition, be blues music. This rigid reading of BBP is based precisely on the idea that blackness is essential to blues music, and without blackness, there is no blues. A looser, or *non-rigid* reading of BBP would merely insist that if blackness is taken out of the blues, then we have



something different that can still adequately be recognized or identified as the blues. This non-rigid reading of BBP shifts the position somewhat towards Blues Universalism, and seems to make different, *black* and *non-black* varieties of the blues possible.

Since even in the non-rigid reading of BBP, the blues still is, essentially or by definition, tied to the particular human feature of blackness, black culture, and the black historical origins and social conditions that created the blues, the result could easily be seen as the recognition of something like *two categories of authenticity* in the blues. Thus, our first- or A-category blues would be black and more authentic in nature, while our second- or B-category blues would be white (or more generally, non-black) and therefore, also less authentic in nature. This appears to be the kind of non-rigid BBP position that Harris is arguing for<sup>7</sup> as he (2015b) writes that

[H]eritage and culture do matter in music. These things can not be faked. We bring who ever we are to the music that we play. That is reality. Music is not some magical realm where we leave our identity, our histories and unique experiences at the door and where culture doesn't matter. This means that although he is a superb guitarist, the music of Eric Clapton will never be the same as B.B. King. This is not to dismiss Sir Eric, nor any of the other non-Black guitar players who have found a musical home in the blues. It is saying that since their experience is different, the music they make will also be different. Playing in a musical style from a particular culture, even at expert levels, will never be the same as an expert player who is from the culture.

#### 4. *Authenticity, Ownership, and Meaning in the Blues*

Our BR3 issue of authenticity with its two different categories apparently generated by the non-rigid reading of Black Blues Particularism quite naturally connects with the theme of *ownership*, which also comes

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7 Such a position is not limited to Harris or to black commentators alone. In discussing white blues scholars, Christian O'Connell (2013, p. 65) points out that many writers shared the desire to defend the music from white cultural colonialism: "Inherent in this vision of the blues was the disdain with which white scholars often depicted white musicians. The attempts of white British musicians to play and popularize black music, from skiffle in the late Fifties to the rhythm and blues covers of the Rolling Stones and the Animals in the Sixties, had made writers such as Derrick Steward-Baxter and Paul Oliver 'shudder' with revulsion. Indeed, the latter argued that whites would never be able to replicate black music because they did not possess the magical quality of 'soul'." (O'Connell 2013, p. 66)

up in the discussion and relevant literature. If we do recognize black people and black culture as the paradigms, standard-setters, and originators of blues as well as representatives of A-category blues authenticity, then can we, or should we even, accordingly accept that black people somehow *own* the blues? Using the terminology of ‘heritage’ or ‘heritage musicians’ (cf. Harris 2015b; Opening Plenary 2012) in connection with black people would also seem to clearly indicate an inherited black ownership of the blues.

Supposing that such ownership of a whole genre of music<sup>8</sup> would make sense to begin with, we could try to articulate some systematic comparisons between the positions distinguished in the previous section. The idea of some degree of ownership of the blues certainly seems to be at least compatible with both the rigid and non-rigid readings of Black Blues Particularism, whereas Blues Universalism and its contextual transferability works against any form of particularized ownership. With *rigid* BBP, black ownership of the blues becomes an essential feature of the music in such a strict manner that no-one else *can* own or even play the blues. With *non-rigid* BBP, black ownership is not as narrowly defined, since it arguably leaves some room for white (or non-black) ownership of *B-category blues*. Blues Universalism, then, naturally aligns with a doctrine of *no ownership* of the blues, as within the position, the music is taken to be universally and openly accessible.

Harris seems to have a somewhat divided attitude towards the ownership of the blues. On the one hand, he (Harris 2015a) clearly states that the issue is *not* about ownership,<sup>9</sup> nor about policing the music-making of white people, or about giving out permission slips or licenses to perform the blues. On the other hand, Harris (2015a) claims that faced with the attitudes of Blues Universalism, the black blues player wonders to himself, ‘well, damn can’t Black folk have *nothing?*’. He (Harris 2015a) also writes that the Blues Universalists who deny the history of the music and the people will aggressively defend their privilege to play the music and will fight with all their might like a prospector guarding his claim in Native land. Harris (2015a) continues that just as they have laid claim to lands across the globe without asking *the original owners* (italics mine) of the land, white people have had the privilege of playing whatever music they want

8 As opposed, e.g., to ownership of a copyright to an individual song.

9 “[...] since everyone knows that blues is Black music, the product of Black survival despite a system that worked overtime to snuff out Black lives” (Harris 2015a).

to play. These latter remarks together with the prospector analogy that he uses would certainly seem to tie Harris's discussion rather explicitly with the theme of ownership.

Whatever we may think about the philosophical possibility of owning the blues (or any other genre of music for that matter) by a group of people, we should be mindful of certain problematic actualities in the current music business which give concrete economic and political urgency to our BR1–BR3 issues of blues recognition. Harris (2015b) depicts the situation as follows:

The reality is that white people do own the blues in a very real, economic sense. Record companies, promoters, booking agents, audiences, blues societies and organizations are and have been overwhelmingly white since the very beginning of the 'race record' (music marketed to Black people) industry. [...] Black people have no real ownership in the blues music industry, having a position more akin to sharecroppers who produce the crop but who have no economic power or control over the industry.

In reviewing Gussow's (2020) monograph *Whose Blues?*,<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Cataliotti (2021, p. 57) points out that the inequality that needs to be addressed is absolutely unavoidable, and continues that the real challenge is to figure out how to make sure that African Americans will always be empowered, credited, and recompensed in the realm of the blues (Cataliotti, 2021, p. 58). It is easy to agree, but it is perhaps not so clear whether arguing over the issue of cultural ownership in connection with BR1 and BR3 is an efficient strategy for dealing with BR2, or the problematic misrecognition and non-recognition of black blues musicians.

Harris (2015a) admits that in reality, white people around the world already play the blues by the millions, and even concedes that many play well in the style. To some extent, then, in our problems BR1–BR3, the issues of empirical adequacy and conceptual stipulation would seem to be intertwined. As already illustrated by our initial metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River, what we observe and how we talk about things is to a large extent determined by the concepts we use (cf. e.g. Haaparanta & Koskinen 2012). One thing that should be noticed at this point is that with a *rigid* understanding of Black Blues Particularism, whites *laying claim* or *stealing* the blues, at least by playing it themselves, would become a conceptual impossibility. The rigid version of BBP would also make blues

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10 The title of Gussow's (2020) book in its way also highlights the issue of ownership.

completely inaccessible to white people as well as to all other non-blacks. In the name of empirical adequacy, this might then be taken to constitute a counterexample against *rigid* BBP, leading to its rejection.

If we do accept it as an empirical fact that white people (together with other non-blacks) play the blues by the millions, then *non-rigid* Black Blues Particularism would still seem to remain at least a viable option. However, what makes this position less palatable for non-black blues players is the possible assumption of two categories of authenticity. For non-black players and singers of the blues, it is not a very inspiring prospect to devote a lot of time, energy, and emotion to a blues commitment that would somehow be pre-destined to produce a second-rate or B-category result, no matter how good one would or could become. This seemed to be the implication of Harris's earlier comparison between Eric Clapton and B.B. King. The impression is only strengthened by Harris's already familiar emphasis of the intimate connection between music and culture, as he (Harris 2015a) writes that

Of course, it may be in the same *style* as the original, but the meaning of a song such as Son House's 'My Black Mama' will always be changed with a different performer. This is especially true if the performer is not from the Black culture that gave birth to the blues.<sup>11</sup>

Again, just as with blues 'not being the same' before, here too, a lot depends on what we read into the notion of 'changed meaning'. It can be taken either to imply the two different categories of authenticity where one is more valuable than the other, or to just mean *different*, as in *not the same*, in a less normative and evaluatively neutral way. Thus, we end up with two possible readings of non-rigid Black Blues Particularism. The first one generates two different levels of authenticity, while the second one is more unbiased in merely accepting normatively indifferent differences in blues performances by blacks and non-blacks.

Whether we go with the categorized and rated, or with the neutral and indifferent interpretation, it should already be more or less self-evident that with different performers, the meanings of songs are always going to change for the simple reason that the interpretations are bound

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11 As there are plenty of black performers' blues songs around without any explicit mention of blackness in their titles or lyrics, it seems that in choosing Son House's 'My Black Mama' as his example, Harris wants to repeatedly emphasize the feature of blackness. For an excellent biography of Son House himself, see Beaumont (2011).

to be different in a multitude of ways. This holds true even between distinct black performers, unless we want to make the questionable suggestion that black people somehow form a cultural monolith, within which there is no distinguishing between the individual performances e.g. of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, and Muddy Waters. What this arguably shows is that a demarcation line between differences in meaning cannot be decisively drawn between black and white, or between black and non-black.

In leaving behind evaluative categories of authenticity, the neutral and normatively indifferent interpretation of non-rigid Black Blues Particularism already shifts us very close towards Blues Universalism. The differences in blues performances could assumably still be noted, but not specifically evaluated or ranked anymore, which appears almost the same as taking the blues to be, essentially or by definition, a genre of music that is formally characterizable, musically recognizable, and freely transferable from one particular cultural, historical, and social context to another. The contextual transferability of Blues Universalism seems compatible with neutrally registering differences between performers from different cultures as well as within them, and the line between the two adjacent positions of neutral non-rigid BBP and full-blown BU becomes very thin, if not impossible to draw.

As we shift from particularist ideas towards universalist ones, it becomes more and more difficult to recognize the special nature and role of black people and black culture in and for the blues. This special place itself can be taken as both important and undeniable. On the other hand, as we shift back from full Blues Universalism towards different degrees of particularism, we get either only B-category blues authenticity left for non-blacks, or in the rigid Black Blues Particularist extreme, blues restricted to black people alone, which would not appear to correspond with generally accepted facts. Thus, it seems surprisingly difficult to formulate a clearly articulated, systematically stable, and intellectually sustainable position that would avoid the extremes, solve the problems inherent in the intermediary positions, and also incorporate the important insights of particularism and universalism that we wish to hold on to.<sup>12</sup>

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12 For in seminal discussion concerning some of the central philosophical tensions involved, see the volume *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Gutmann (1994).

### 5. *Recognition of Ideas – Musical and Scholarly*

In the foregoing, we have set the stage for our discussion with the initial metaphors of Harris's Tree and Lomax's River; introduced conceptualizations from contemporary recognition theory; distinguished the interrelated problems BR1–BR3 of identity, mis- or non-recognition, and authenticity; discussed the positions of Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism together with their variations; and ended up with apparent problems in all of the charted positional variations. What are we to think, then, after all this? Is there any way of trying to solve, or at least to ease somehow, the persistently remaining problems in the options charted above?

Gussow's (2020) conclusions, or rather, the lack of them, does not help us much forward. Beyond distinguishing the pair of ideologies that he calls 'Black Bluesism' and 'Blues Universalism,' Gussow does not structure his discussion very systematically, or articulate his conclusions at the end of the book in an especially useful way as starting points for further discussion. It is thus rather easy to agree with Robert H. Cataliotti's review of the monograph, as he writes about Gussow's discussion of the inequality of the overwhelmingly white control of the contemporary blues idiom:

At times, that ideological debate gets lost in the other agenda items he's addressing, even if his conscious decision to address a 'productive disarray of our contemporary moment' signals he is assembling a kind of postmodern collage (structured in 12 'Bars') of interrelated ideas and subjects that ultimately do relate to this crucial issue. A more tightly focused examination of the ideological debate may have been more effective, even though his literature survey and close readings are revelatory – they could stand as an independent study (Cataliotti 2021, p. 57).

This is something of a pity, as it does seem that with just a bit more systematic effort, and some additional work put into thematizing and organizing the highly interesting volume, Gussow could have taken the discussion much further from where it remains in the book. Clearly, Gussow knows his business, and thus probably could have gone much deeper into realizing his stated goal of creating a situation where "a more thoughtful and productive conversation begins to emerge" (Gussow 2020, p. 2).

As far as Harris's conclusions or recommendations are concerned, in addition to insisting that blues is black music, he seems willing to emphasize that white performers should clearly operate within their own boundaries of identity and their own cultural spheres of authenticity, not crossing any lines of culture, history, or social context:

White blues lovers who want to sing and play in the style should stop trying to sound Black. Keep it real and sing like who you are! Be true to yourself! Express *yourself*, not your imitation of someone from another culture. This is what true artists do (Harris 2015a).

The problem with this type of approach is that it seems to assume and impose, upon both black and white individuals, certain pre-defined collective identities that easily become too tightly scripted and compulsive for individual persons (cf. Appiah 1994). Again, the fundamental question is who gets to recognize some object as something, and whether this act of recognition is adequate or not. Moreover, it could convincingly be argued that true artists recurrently take their influences from various sources, and often do not respect any pre-defined or culturally established boundaries. This is also how culture, including blues music, develops and keeps its vitality. Blues itself is a gumbo of various ingredients, and not all of these are unquestionably or purely black (cf. Wald 2004; Gioia 2008; Gussow 2020).

Instead of assuming that we are faced with an exclusive either-or type of ideological choice between Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism, we could try to articulate how it is that they are, in fact, both true. One way of achieving this would be by utilizing our conceptualizations of contemporary recognition theory. In connection with individual human beings, we do not have to decide in an exclusivist manner whether they are persons or whether they are members of certain cultures, however defined. This is the case, because all individual people share their universal humanity while simultaneously also belonging to more specific particular cultures, histories, and social conditions distinguishing them from each other.

It would be foolish to try to decide whether the author of this paper is a human being or whether he is a Finn, because he is assuredly both. The same could be seen to hold with the blues. It is black music because of its particular origins, but it is also a universal genre of music that can be enjoyed, studied, and played by whites and other non-blacks as well. Within such a conceptualization, we are freed of the problematic assumption of an exclusive ideological choice between Black Blues Particularism and Blues Universalism, while still retaining our own personal freedom to esteem and evaluate individuals or groups of blues performers as we please.

We could then conclude by suggesting that musical ideas, including the blues, should be recognized in similar fashion to scholarly ones, that is,

by respecting and crediting the original sources while openly utilizing and freely developing them into further directions. Just as a competent scholar knows the particular roots and historical origins of her ideas, openly crediting and referencing them, a competent blues player of whatever color or culture knows where the power and beauty of the music comes from. Blues is black music, and thanks to its black originators, we can all universally enjoy and participate in it. To make our recognition real, and to give our appreciation concrete plausibility, we should organize and distribute our resources accordingly, or as a blues lyric might have it, put our money where our mouth is.

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# TO FORGIVE BUT NOT FORGET?

## On the relationship between recognition and reconciliation in Indigenous-settler Australian relations

Ng Qian Qian

### *Abstract*

What is the relationship between recognition and reconciliation? I argue that reconciliation undermines recognition's promise of eventual attainment of freedom for all, even as it is crucial to the project of recognition. As this crucial relationship has been undertheorized, this paper hopes to spark new conversations within recognition theory. I discuss the reconciliation between Indigenous Australian peoples and the settler-colonial state, focusing on the pivotal 2008 apology for the "Stolen Generations" and more recent proposal of Makarrata. Drawing on literature on anger, forgiveness and psychoanalysis by Agnes Callard, Jacques Derrida and Paul Muldoon, I propose four criteria for a proper apology for reconciliation. Applying these criteria to the 2008 Apology by then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, I argue that the apology is inadequate, and further that an apology can never be an adequate mode of reconciliation. I end by considering prospects of alternative forms of reconciliation.

*Keywords:* Reconciliation, Recognition, Anger, Apology, Australia.

Though recognition and multiculturalism do not necessarily entail reconciliation, any project of recognition and multiculturalism that takes seriously historical injustices and restorative justice necessarily has to engage in reconciliation. A theory of reconciliation remains under-conceptualised, at least in the Australian context which I focus on.<sup>1</sup> I take the more common use of 'reconciliation', which refers to formal processes of acknowledging past misdeeds and engaging in restorative justice as the basis of repaired relations. Will Kymlicka's brand of liberal multiculturalism arguably attempts to embed reconciliation. Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism is "a distinctively liberal approach to minority rights" with a luck egalitarian

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1 A. Little, *The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous–Settler Relations in Australia*, in "Political Theory", 48, 1, 2020, pp. 30-56.

tarian core that prescribes these rights on account of a person's history; specifically, their mode of entry into the territory.<sup>2</sup>

Recognition theory lags on this front: it requires but currently lacks an embedding of reconciliation. Here I focus on projects of recognition in the Hegelian tradition, such as Axel Honneth's and Nancy Fraser's, whose key features are to "[designate] an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects in which each sees the other as its equal and also as separate from it".<sup>3</sup> Recognition, in the theoretical account based on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, begins when two self-consciousnesses simultaneously realise they are both equally objects to each other even as they think of themselves as a subject.<sup>4</sup> Neo-Hegelian recognition theories take as their promised end goal the eventual attainment of freedom of all individuals via mutual recognition. Fraser's and Honneth's recognition theories also aim to provide guidance to practical matters of material redistribution and status recognition, though they work through the logic of redistribution differently. Although both account for the intricate entanglement between those two categories, Honneth subordinates all injustices, including material forms, to recognition, while Fraser treats the material and cultural as irreducible bases but risks reducing recognition to a status good to be redistributed.

Regardless of the ontological ordering of material and non-material, I argue that any theory of recognition, including and especially the liberal family which Honneth and Fraser are in, which takes as their fundamental assumption and goal some form of equality between peoples, – an equal right to full esteem for Honneth and an equal opportunity to be accorded esteem for Fraser – have to correct for the obvious inequalities arising from historical injustices. My point is simply that given an awareness of history, of all past wrongs that have led to an individual's current plight, a project of recognition that takes seriously the development of the flourishing self, embedded in history and society, must then redress these wrongs via reconciliation broadly defined.

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2 W. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, New York 1995, p. 75.

3 N. Fraser, A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, London 2003, p. 10.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, engl. transl. by A. V. Miller, J. N. Findlay, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1979, §§ 178–184.

Thus, I argue that recognition theories need to embed some practice of restorative justice in order to be consistent with their egalitarian ideals. As mentioned earlier, Kymlicka's luck egalitarian multiculturalism already folds reconciliation into his theoretical structure: historical injustices become the first diagnosis and main ailment to treat via minority rights. Consequently, theories of recognition and multiculturalism that give due consideration to historical injustices necessitate the embedding of reconciliation (currently understood as a formal process enacted by the state), and resultant practices of restorative injustice may be taken as manifestations of recognition. The question then becomes: what structure of recognition theory do we have, given its old goals of freedom and autonomy for all, and newer consideration of accounting for reconciliation?

However, if the project of recognition cannot take off without proper reconciliation, I argue that recognition theorists are caught in a bind. Though reconciliation is both a prerequisite and expression of recognition, my thesis is that the structure of reconciliation potentially forecloses the possibilities of recognition, rendering them incompatible on a serious level. As mentioned, reconciliation here refers to a family of processes that acknowledge and make up for past wrongs. I focus on reconciliation in the form of an apology, and in so doing, follow in the footsteps of scholars such as Sarah Maddison and David Mellor et al.: "Reconciliation requires both an apology and forgiveness," so as to allow "disrupted or severed relationships to begin anew".<sup>5</sup>

My essay proceeds in three sections. In order to argue that reconciliation in the form of an apology will structurally, always seek to sublimate, I first derive some conditions for a proper apology by drawing upon accounts by Agnes Callard, Jacques Derrida and Paul Muldoon. Second, I apply these conditions to Indigenous-settler relations in Australia by considering whether a state-level public apology by the Parliament of Australia to Indigenous Australians in 2008 for the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families can meet these criteria and consider some inadequacies of a state apology that beckons Indigenous peoples' forgiveness. Third, I attempt to think through some alternatives to the current (Abrahamic) model of apology and forgiveness, but remain pessimistic. I conclude with considerations that a fatalistic logic of reconciliation can inform and thus

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5 D. Mellor, D. Bretherton, and L. Firth, *Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Australia: The Dilemma of Apologies, Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, in "Peace and Conflict", 13, 1, 2007, pp. 11-12, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0094022>.

shapes the project of recognition, signaling the need for a radical rethinking for a project of recognition now too narrow for its stipulated ambitions.

A caveat before I proceed: My argument goes on to stress the significance of the Indigenous point of view in reconciliation, but I acknowledge that Indigenous Australians “recall oppression and opportunity in different ways”.<sup>6</sup> As a theoretical exploration of the apology, my paper cannot and does not purport to provide a full representation of the Indigenous response(s) to the apology. From an empirical perspective, it is then fair to say that my paper is a speculation about Indigenous responses to any reconciliation initiative, – ranging from support to skepticism (specifically, a strong proposal for internal self-determination) – on the part of the non-Indigenous.

### 1. *Conditions of a proper apology*

I now lay out four conditions necessary for a proper apology that can be applied to the Australian state’s apology for the Stolen Generations. The first condition of a proper apology as reconciliation is actually a pre-condition: a historical awareness of a wrongdoing. In her piece “The Reason to Be Angry Forever,” Agnes Callard defines the eternal anger argument as follows:

P1: My betrayal of you at t1 is your reason for being angry with me at t2.

P2: If it is true at t2 that I betrayed you at t1, then it will also be true at t3, t4, t5, and so on that I betrayed you at t1.

Conclusion: If you have a reason to be angry with me, you will have a reason to be angry with me forever.<sup>7</sup>

Unless a new reason directly resolves the wrong at t1 by eliminating it, the wronged has reason to remain eternally angry. In other words, the anger must be “*about* something practicable—something that *can* be changed”.<sup>8</sup> If the wrong pertains to an unchangeable state of affairs, say murder, it seems the wronged (e.g. those from the same family, group, or identify

6 T. Rowse, *Indigenous Heterogeneity*, in “Australian Historical Studies”, 45, 3, 2014, p. 310, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2014.946523>.

7 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. by M. Cherry & O. Flanagan, *The moral psychology of anger*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2018, pp. 123-137; here p. 123.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

with the murdered) would have a reason to be angry forever, because we currently have no means to revive the dead. With such a strict sense of issue resolution, a lot of anger can rightfully remain eternal, provided the wrongdoing at t1 continues to be acknowledged.

Callard assumes that anger, along with other emotions that reflect care, necessarily follow from a wrongdoing<sup>9</sup>. To elaborate, anger “is uniquely poised to apprehend [...] the *wrongness* [...] of some action”.<sup>10</sup> I will not question Callard’s assumption.<sup>11</sup> Of greater relevance to us is how anger is an emotion felt individually, but that its resolution cannot be solved alone; anger can only be jointly resolved with the violator of the relationship.<sup>12</sup> Anger cannot be resolved alone is, as seen above, because the state of affairs was wrought by another party and if irreversible, cannot be resolved practically by any party. If the wronged remain concerned but the wrongdoer does not, the wronged have a reason, but also have no choice except, to remain eternally angry. In other words, any reconciliatory effort, including an apology, can only be made provided the occurrence of the wrongdoing remains relevant, or of concern to both the wronged and the wrongdoer. I call this first condition Historical Awareness.

The second condition for a proper apology is that it ought to be a product of what Callard calls a renewed co-valuation. To Callard, “[anger] devolves from a special kind of valuing: shared valuing”.<sup>13</sup> Crucially, Callard equates wrongs that anger is adept at identifying, with “disvaluational significance” of the wrongdoer’s action. In other words, we only feel certain emotions that indicate care, such as anger, towards the wrongdoing because we have a prior relationship with the wrongdoer, who has committed an action (wrongdoing) that disvalued the relationship.<sup>14</sup> Thus, anger must be resolved jointly, because it emerges in response to the wrongdoer’s vi-

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9 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

11 I note that Callard’s use of anger is similar to, and indeed she cites, Amia Srinivasan’s (*Would Politics Be Better Off Without Anger?*, in “The Nation”, 30. November 2016) notion of righteous anger as indicative of a moral transgression (as opposed to disappointment that might indicate the unfulfillment of a supererogatory task) (A. Srinivasan, *The Aptness of Anger*, in “The Journal of Political Philosophy”, 26, 2, 2018, p. 123-144).

12 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., pp. 134-35.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

olation of a shared project of valuation that is the relationship. Call this second condition Renewed Co-valuation.

One way to resolve anger is to have it no longer be of concern. Renewed co-valuation need not lead to an apology, it can lead to an agreement to cease the relationship: we come to a shared feeling that the wrongdoing no longer matters.<sup>15</sup> Extending this logic, one way to resolve anger is for both the wrongdoer and wronged's to forget about its occurrence.<sup>16</sup> An apology as a type of relevant reparatory step, is first an acknowledgement of the wrong and thus the wronged's right to be angry with the wrongdoer. It is also a mode of renewed co-valuation, of joint problem resolution without eliminating the wrong at t1.

The third condition is that a proper (sincere) apology has to stem from contrition of the wrongdoer. The apology correlates the wronged's anger with the wrongdoer's contrition (the third condition), and anger and contrition are transformed into reconciliation.<sup>17</sup> Here Callard's conception of a proper apology converges with Derrida's understanding of forgiveness: Comparing anger to a genuine question, and efforts to jointly re-value a relationship to a satisfactory answer, an apology is an answer that we as genuine askers cannot expect.<sup>18</sup> To have an apology premeditated by the wronged person, and have it executed by the wrongdoer, would merely be satisfying and redressing a punishable wrong, i.e. a non-eternal anger; forgiveness becomes an economic enterprise where the apology can be calculated and made commensurate with the wrong.<sup>19</sup> A structural offshoot of this requirement is that an apology cannot be anticipated and thus, neces-

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15 *Ibid.*, p. 134.

16 I concede that there seems to be something unsatisfactory about resolving anger by forgetting about the wrongdoing. I see two compromises here: either we tolerate the notion of an unsatisfactory but proper form of resolution via forgetting / historical amnesia, which is the route I am picking, or we distinguish between the wrong committed and the anger felt by the wronged. The latter seems plausible, but it quickly runs into limits; recall anger, especially righteous anger, is supposed to be an appropriate tool to indicate a wrong (moral transgression, on Amia Srinivasan's terms). The interlocuter thus cannot simultaneously hold that anger is apt in identifying wrongs, while accommodating cases of apt anger without a relevant wrong.

17 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., p. 134.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133.

19 J. Derrida, *On Forgiveness*, in Id., *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Routledge, London and New York 2005, pp. 34-35; A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., pp. 132-133.



sarily puts the wronged in a position of dependence and neediness towards the wrongdoer.<sup>20</sup> Because the wronged cannot anticipate when the apology (for Derrida) or the contrite effort to re-covaluate the relationship (for Callard) will occur, it becomes an experience of aporia. I call this third condition: Contrition.

The fourth and final condition is that the apology should come from the wrongdoer, but forgiveness cannot come from the same entity. Call this fourth condition Apology-dichotomy. Across thinkers like Callard, Arendt and Derrida, the assumed model of apology-forgiveness is that the wrongdoer apologises and the wronged forgives.<sup>21</sup> After all, anger arises from a wrong that could only be inflicted by another party with whom we are already in a relation of joint valuation with. Though it is possible to inflict a wrong and thus devalue one's relation with oneself, I am particularly interested in the paradigmatic form of apologies, which do not involve self-apologies and thus, self-forgiveness. Thus, we, along with the aforementioned thinkers, assume the default model of one entity offering the apology, and another entity accepting the apology as a sign of forgiveness.

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20 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., p. 133.

21 I take apology and forgiveness to be two sides of the same coin. I acknowledge that there may be instances where apologies are made without the intention to receive forgiveness, and of forgiveness doled out without a prior apology. I am more concerned with the former than latter. Some Holocaust survivors who forgive the general figure of Nazi doctors long past are examples of the latter. Arendt defines forgiveness as "the undoing of what was done" and thus limits forgiveness to what can be punished (*The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1958, p. 241). Strictly speaking then, Arendt might dismiss the possibility of forgiveness even in those cases; if the Nazi doctors are out at large or dead, unable to be trialed, then perhaps the forgiveness of some survivors will fail to qualify as valid under Arendt's conditions. On the contrary, Derrida applies forgiveness to precisely that which Arendt deems unforgivable (*On Forgiveness*, cit., pp. 32-37). Thus, despite their intractable disagreement on what forgiveness is, they share a common definition of what is unforgivable. I believe, for my purposes within the scope of this essay, that I do not need to position myself between Arendt and Derrida or to provide a technical definition of forgiveness. I take forgiveness in a general way, as that status granted by the wronged following a wrongdoer's apology. But in my analysis of the apology, I will draw on the notion of the unforgivable, that which Arendt's forgiveness does not apply to, and what Derrida's pure forgiveness forgives.

## *2. The inadequacies of the state apology*

In this section, I analyse the nature of a state-issued apology based on the Parliament of Australia's 2008 public apology to the Indigenous Australians, and in particular, the Stolen Generations. I acknowledge here that two apologies were given to the Indigenous Australians, one by Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on behalf of the Parliament of Australia, and another by Liberal Leader of Opposition Dr Brendan Nelson. I focus on the first of two apologies, primarily because it is debatable whether the content of Dr Nelson's apology even qualifies as an apology for the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families. There was significant controversy regarding Dr Nelson's apology, and a plausible interpretation is that the Leader of Opposition was apologizing for insufficient policing of Aboriginal children and families. My paper adheres to the general consensus that past government policies that culminated in the forced removal of Indigenous children from families between approximately 1905 and 1967 have led to economic and existential harm across multiple generations of Indigenous Australians. Secondly, my goal here is to study what appears to be a better trajectory towards proper recognition as attainment of freedom for all, premised on an acknowledgement of wrongs, to reveal how reconciliation-as-apology can still undercut recognition. Dr Nelson's apology arguably undercuts recognition in ways more blatant than hitherto undertheorized internal contradictions of a state apology, making it a less fruitful case study for the scope of my study.

My aim in this section is twofold; to discern on one hand, problems pertaining to the state in fulfilling the proper conditions for an apology, and on the other, potential inadequacies of the model of an apology itself in achieving reconciliation. My argument is that a sense of narcissistic shame that underpins (at least the Australian nation-state) makes it difficult for a state to fulfill all four criteria, constituting a low chance for proper reconciliation via an apology. And if it is unlikely that a state can ever provide a proper apology as a form of reconciliation, it seems highly problematic for the project of recognition that currently, similarly, depends on the nation-state to dole out recognition.

Analysing the reconciliation process in Australia whose major turning point was the Federal Parliamentary Apology to the 'Stolen Generations' in 2008, Paul Muldoon noted how:

by characterizing it as the moment in which Australia ‘began anew’, cleansed of the stain upon its soul, Rudd effectively bypassed the moment of reception altogether. Rhetorically, if not really, the performance of the Apology became a transcendent moment, turning Australia instantaneously, as it were, into a ‘fully united and fully reconciled people’ (Rudd, 2008).<sup>22</sup>

The apology seems to have accomplished, in one fell swoop, three things. First, past injustices are deemed to have been addressed (even if their effects have not). Second, a new chapter in Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations has been claimed. Third, implied is a sense of morality, even moral superiority, of the government’s ability to diagnose a wrong they committed and (begin to) recompense for it. These three effects were accomplished at the expense of foreclosing “the possibility of its own deferral or rejection” by the aboriginal people.<sup>23</sup> The combined effect of these three upshots seems to be to reinstate power asymmetry between the state and the minority Indigenous peoples.

Pertaining to Contrition, the case of Australia has drawn out the fine line between narcissism and contrition *en route* to true atonement; specifically, that proper reconciliation might be inclined to tip in favor of the narcissism. Pavinelli has suggested that there is possibility for an apology to be made out of contrition, for Australians “are truly sorry when history once again reveals that liberalism’s goodwill has been perverted”.<sup>24</sup> Yet, this trace of contrition is intermingled with what Muldoon might label narcissistic wounds: “[Australians] do not feel good when they feel responsible for critical social conflict, pain, or trauma”.<sup>25</sup> Muldoon’s wariness of narcissism refers to the suspicion that the motivation behind the apology is to alleviate the colonizer’s shame, to overcome the gaping wound between their ego and ego-ideal, and pursue narcissistic fantasies of wholeness and innocence.<sup>26</sup>

A key upshot of Muldoon’s explicit condemnation of the apology as motivated by narcissism, is that it turns out to be regressive against the goal of correcting for historical injustices. The apology, in its claiming of moral superiority, then seems not to be meant for the Indigenous Austral-

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22 P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable: Shame, Narcissism, Justice and Apology*, in “International Political Science Review”, 38, 2, 2017, pp. 213-26.

23 *Ibid.*

24 E. A. Pavinelli, J. Frow, and M. Morris, *The Cunning of Recognition : A Reply to John Frow and Meaghan Morris*, in “Critical Inquiry”, 25, 3, 2007, p. 637.

25 *Ibid.*

26 Cf. P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable*, cit.

ians but more for the healing of ‘other’ Australians’ narcissistic wounds. The regression steps in because the (re)establishment of the wrongdoer’s moral superiority sabotages efforts towards a genuine atonement that truly grasps the magnitude of the injustices against the Stolen Generations.<sup>27</sup> In short, the effect of the apology then seems to be directed to the healing of the settler-colonial state’s self-understanding rather than genuine, productive atonement for the misdeed that wounded the state’s narcissism, where the genuine atonement entails earnest dialogue in the form of the second condition of joint re-valuation, as elaborated later.

This fine line between narcissism and Contrition makes it hard for states, including Australia, to even fulfil the precondition for an apology: the acknowledgement of a wrongdoing that accounts for a form of eternal anger (usually of the minority groups), and the commitment to correct a nation’s history.<sup>28</sup> Representation of now widely accepted though still contentious events of the doctrine of terra nullius, massacres along the frontier and forcible removing of ‘half-caste’ children in the 60s, was widely debated in the history wars from the 70s to 90s. There was a worry that Australia’s history was being re-written to a point where “Australians should apologise for most of it”.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, with the benefit of hindsight, we know history has now revealed a wrongdoing at tl of live concern to the wronged, an unpunishable wrong (for the actual wrongdoers are no longer present) and so an eternal anger, “the unforgivable [...] that *calls* for forgiveness”.<sup>30</sup>

The underlying narcissism of the state, now wounded upon being forced aware of their past wrongdoings, also complicates the fulfillment of the second criterion of a joint effort to arrive at a renewed co-valuation, supposedly undertaken between the state and the wronged. Interestingly, Australia has a decades-long and still-live debate on matters of reconciliation and leading up to the apology. Where the apology started as the pre-requisite to recognition, –“without shame there could be no justice” – the apology came to be overdetermined after much pushback from conservative politicians.<sup>31</sup> It stood for making up of the wrongdoing, a new foundation for Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, and an establishment of the state’s moral superi-

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27 *Ibid.*

28 P. Muldoon, *Forget Recognition?*, in “Arena”, 2018, p. 26.

29 *Id.*, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable*, cit., p. 215.

30 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., pp. 123-137; Derrida, *On Forgiveness*, cit., p. 32; P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable*, cit.

31 P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable*, cit., p. 216

ority: “no longer guilty through and through, but already another, and better than the guilty one”.<sup>32</sup> It reduced righteously eternal anger to an economy of commensurable forgiveness and misgivings, where an apology was implied to be sufficient in redressing the wrong. Hence, Muldoon also suggested that an apology, even if delivered sincerely, might not suffice: “‘Sorry We Killed You’, encapsulates this problem with perfect economy”.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that the Apology has been inept at “addressing the broader structural inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in contemporary Australia and their grounding in a historical experience of conflict,” and criticised for its too-narrow scope that focused only on the “Stolen Generations” out of the totality of wrongdoings.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the biggest gap between a state and a proper apology is the fourth criterion of Apology-dichotomy, that the state ought to have the wronged (Indigenous peoples for Australia) accept the apology as a show of forgiveness. To do so would require, as hinted by Callard’s insights that anger indicates an existing relationship and co-valuation is premised on some level of equality between the two parties, the raising in status, at least symbolically as a “people,” to a level that could withhold forgiveness from the settler state. Assuming the aforementioned heterogeneity of Indigenous voices that casts doubt on the validity of organised representation, arguably no such entity currently exists in Australia. The Australian federal government recently rejected a proposal to form a “Makarrata committee” to oversee matters of reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> The problem, as Muldoon foregrounded, is “the risk of embedding a ‘First Nations Voice’ in the Constitution [such] that ‘the Parliament may have no recourse to abolish or replace it’”.<sup>36</sup> In the policed absence of an entity with the constitutional clout to grant or withhold forgiveness, it seems only pragmatic that the settler state do away with reciprocal recognition in the form of reconciliation.

Given the existence of reconciliation committees at various points in history, such as in South Africa, I want to consider such a hypothetical in an attempt to discern the structural efficacy of an apology as reconciliation. I want to consider what happens if all four conditions are fulfilled: if there is acknowledgement of the settler state’s wrong, if Contrition rather than

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32 J. Derrida, *On Forgiveness*, cit., p. 35.

33 P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable*, cit., p. 224

34 A. Little, *The Politics of Makarrata*, cit., p. 33.

35 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 34-48.

36 P. Muldoon, *Forget Recognition?*, cit., p. 27.

narcissism motivates an apology, if the apology is reached as a project of joint re-valuation, and if Indigenous Australians are in a position to refuse the apology. Ultimately, I want to consider if reconciliation and recognition are structurally compatible projects.

One reason why reconciliation-via-apology and recognition may be incompatible lies in how the party that apologises necessarily claims higher moral ground. The difficulty of the third condition of Contrition then, is that it is hard to distinguish from narcissism; both Contrition and narcissism lead to the settler state's ability to claim moral superiority. This higher ground can be read as an unfair advantage where it was motivated by narcissism, or a proper outcome if motivated by Contrition. Either way, I will argue the settler state's ability to claim higher moral ground disadvantages the Indigenous Australians, for they are left with no choice but to eventually accept the apology. The disadvantage can be seen in purely rhetorical terms; when forgiveness is withheld by Indigenous Australians, the situation reverses: "[the] one who confessed sees himself repulsed and sees the other as in the wrong".<sup>37</sup> But I argue that the disadvantage is not just on a rhetorical level, but a deeply structural one, for Indigenous Australians find themselves locked into the initiation of the process of the apology, i.e. Renewed Co-valuation.

The tragic irony about the relationship between reconciliation and recognition is that when both projects are properly conducted, i.e. some basic level of equality between Indigenous and other Australians so that Renewed Co-valuation takes place and Apology-dichotomy is granted, the two parties must tend towards sublation.<sup>38</sup> In other words, after fulfilling the second condition of Renewed Co-valuation via an apology, the Apology-dichotomy becomes foreclosing: there is only one way to end the story between the one who apologises and the forgiver, and that is reconciliation via acceptance of the apology by the forgiver. If the wrongdoer extends and maintains an apology, it is a sign that the wrongdoer values "the goods of our relationship"; if the wronged re-

37 G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., § 667.

38 I acknowledge that my argument at this point of the paper becomes very similar to the argument Glen Coulthard puts forward in *Red Skin, White Masks* (University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 2014), notably that the previously colonized peoples will always be disadvantaged in the project of recognition, when recognition is doled out by the settler colonial state.

jects the apology, then the terms of the apology are not jointly agreed.<sup>39</sup> One way to explain the necessary sublation is that the Indigenous peoples and other Australians find themselves irreversibly locked into a relation of mutual dependence. Callard's insight is that anger is only possible on the precondition that there exists a prior relationship with its own norms. On Callard's terms, the Indigenous peoples are angry because of a moral violation the *Other Australians* committed against them; the Indigenous peoples apprehended the other Australians' misvaluation of their shared goods or relation. Anger manifests as the other Australians' and the settler state's defection from this relation, where the shared valuation or project between Indigenous and other Australians can be thought of as joint negotiation of the terms and possibility of co-habitation on the same land. Renewed Co-valuation as resolution of wrongdoing is thus predicated on an equality of consciousness or selfsameness: "the two consciousnesses recognize the authority of the other to act, to judge, and to forgive".<sup>40</sup>

Of course, as I argued above, on Callard's terms, mere Renewed Co-valuation does not have to deterministically lead to a reconciled relation or sublated entity; both parties can jointly agree to dissolve the relation. What I am arguing here is the particular quirk of the apology (and its presupposed confession) that has a foreclosing structure. In its requirement of a forgiver, and in the wronged party's dependence on the wrongdoer to jointly resolve the anger, Indigenous Australians find themselves already in the midst of a process of sublation set in motions not just by reconciliation-via-apology, but arguably since colonization first occurred and relations between the two groups first began. Here then, we see a dovetail between Callard's and Muldoon's logics of reconciliation. Muldoon posits that shame, the driving emotion behind the settler-colonial state's narcissistic apology, is "likely [...] to stimulate efforts to heal the self," to reconcile the ego and ego-ideal, and which predicts that reconciliation via apology will reach closer towards unity or sublation—echoing Hegel's prediction of recognition as absolute

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39 A. Callard, *The Reason to Be Angry Forever*, cit., p. 134.

40 M. Farneth, *Hegel's Sacramental Politics: Confession, Forgiveness, and Absolute Spirit*, in "Journal of Religion", 95, 2, 2015, § 195.

spirit—than any other outcome.<sup>41</sup> The conclusion for reconciliation via an apology is thus a predetermined, if not then limited, one.<sup>42</sup>

To conclude this section briefly, I am pessimistic that state-apologies will be able to simultaneously fulfil all four criteria for a proper apology appropriate for the project of reconciliation. Whether it is an understandable (but perhaps unjustifiable) narcissism and shame that plagues the well-intentioned state, or the conservative considerations for bureaucratic (im)balance of power, the chances of a proper apology, arrived at through fair deliberation and just interventions from the Indigenous peoples, does not seem likely. On the contrary, the state, driven by the aforementioned motivations, will act in ways that regulate existing imbalanced power dynamics; reconciliation as apology seems to inevitably play out in favour of the state, where sublation of Indigenous peoples becomes morally justified. If historical injustices require non-sublation, it is unclear how the state and the projects of reconciliation and recognition can ever suffice. Yet, the project of recognition and point of reconciliation is to correct for existing injustices. The next section thus considers the prospects of other forms of reconciliation besides the apology.

### 3. Alternatives to an apology?

As mentioned in sections one and two, reconciliation need not take the form of an apology. In this section, I provide hypotheticals that admitted-

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41 P. Muldoon, *A Reconciliation Most Desirable: Shame, Narcissism, Justice and Apology*, cit., p. 220.

42 Hegel makes a similar argument in chapter 6 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, explicating a situation of two antagonists, the judging consciousness and wicked consciousness that finally reconcile through a public confession after many rounds of conflicts. The wicked consciousness confesses his mis-action, acted upon his own partial interest and that the judging consciousness pointed out, and can accord himself the status of “beautiful soul.” The judging consciousness that chooses not to accept the confession, does so at the cost of “the highest indignation of the spirit” from the perspective of the other (*Phenomenology*, §667). Crucially for us, Hegel’s judgement dovetails with that of Muldoon, arguing that the two consciousnesses will ultimately reconcile, with the judging consciousness sublated into the wicked consciousness, the latter having already confessed and is able to present itself as “universal” (§ 670). An upshot we can take away from Hegel is that the recipient of the apology or confession can only accept it, because it has already “intuit[ed] itself in others” and will only reach full knowledge of itself as absolute spirit, as a sublated other (§ 667).



ly do not qualify as substantial alternatives, and seek only to give a brief overview of potential obstacles to and problems of adopting alternatives to an apology in seeking reconciliation. I first discuss the possible obstacle of the limits of cultural tolerance, especially in the cross-cultural platform that reconciliation seeks/has to be, against the context of an increasingly Christian world. I then discuss the prospects of less radical variations of current models of apology, highlighting the main worry of slipping into superficial and awkward rituals.

Forgiveness is necessarily culturally specific, yet there may be an increasing trend towards a broad homogenization that might cause resistance towards radically different forms of forgiveness.<sup>43</sup> Derrida observes how “[in] all the scenes of repentance, confession, forgiveness, or apology which have multiplied on the geopolitical scene since the last war, [... they, NQ] do this in an Abrahamic language,” even in contexts that were not traditionally so.<sup>44</sup> To Derrida, the transformation of the model or language of forgiveness towards a convergence in the Christian/Judaist/Islamic tradition is but one manifestation of what he calls “*globalatinisation*,” globalisation but with the emphasis on “the effect of Roman Christianity which today overdetermines all language of law, of politics, and even the interpretation of what is called the ‘return of the religious’”.<sup>45</sup>

If Derrida is right, then this increasingly Abrahamic backdrop might find the Makarrata strange, incommensurable, and intolerable. The Makarrata has been nominated by a convention of Indigenous representatives as the terms on which reconciliation should take place. A Yolngu word that translates in English to treaty, non-Indigenous understandings of Makarrata perceive it “as a merely benign dimension of processes of reconciliation or recognition”.<sup>46</sup> Yet, in Indigenous understandings, there is a connotation of physical hurt in this process of reconciliation: “Makarrata literally means a spear penetrating, usually the thigh, of a person that has done wrong [...] to maim them, to settle them down, to calm them”.<sup>47</sup> Though many Indigenous representatives and Indigenous studies scholars maintain that “the concept of Makarrata

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43 J. Derrida, *On Forgiveness*, cit., p. 28.

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 32.

46 A. Little, *The Politics of Makarrata: Understanding Indigenous–Settler Relations in Australia*, cit., p. 42.

47 *Ibid.*

was one that could do important work for different groups for a variety of reasons,” there remains much ambiguity and confusion even amongst the Senate about what the word means.<sup>48</sup> This problem of whether a form of reconciliation that involves physical hurt, as opposed to the benign Abrahamic model, will be tolerated and even passed again, can only remain open in this paper.

If we extend the vein of conducting reconciliation on the terms of those who have been wronged, at least in the case of Australia and the popular proposal for the Makarrata, the anthropological question of how alternative forms (rituals) of reconciliation might be carried out arises. Numerous frictions abound, but I will focus on three main types: the worry of tokenism from non-Indigenous peoples, internal disagreements within Indigenous peoples, and perhaps most relevant here is the awkwardness of fit across the two groups. Regarding rituals of acknowledgement of country and welcome, sensitive, anti-racist members of non-Indigenous society find themselves caught between the desire to make “genuine contribution to change in attitudes and conduct” and risk of being “seen as token and hypocritical – a salve of conscience”.<sup>49</sup> Even within Indigenous communities, there are numerous internal divisions, from the distinction between “Aboriginal “high culture” of Dreaming and territoriality as opposed to cultural conduct of everyday life,” to qualms over authenticity and legitimacy that are usually only made between Indigenous peoples.<sup>50</sup> And thirdly is the issue of awkwardness of force-fitting, or belatedly re-introducing, “traditional” rituals onto events “from non-Indigenous concerns and forms of organization”.<sup>51</sup> To continue the example of welcome rituals, the awkwardness arises when the non-Indigenous persons turn out to be the ones ‘at home’ in the space of the university or conference room while the Indigenous person ‘welcoming’ the ‘guests’ are specially invited to perform within an allotted slot. Transposing these considerations of traditional but discontinuous, modern but repentant relations onto the issue of reconciliation will probably amass their own specific set of problems on top of the ones already laid out here.

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48 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

49 F. Merlan, *Recent Rituals of Indigenous Recognition in Australia: Welcome to Country*, in “American Anthropologist”, 116, 2, 2014, p. 305.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*

### *Conclusion*

The premise of my inquiry is that the project of recognition cannot take off without proper reconciliation. Yet, I have argued rather pessimistically that reconciliation in the form of an apology from the state to the wronged is improper and will be unlikely to assume a proper form, and listed some difficulties that make the prospect of successful, alternative forms of reconciliation slimmer still. Furthermore, if recognition requires that the possibilities of prescriptions remain open, then my diagnoses of reconciliation as it currently stands (in Australia) that goes in the direction of further entrenchment of asymmetrical power and status between the settler-colonial state and Indigenous peoples make the two projects seem incompatible. Nevertheless, a live debate represents a constant working through, even if the process is not a happy one, and an apology is but a first step.

However, if we are right that the nature of reconciliatory efforts inevitably leads to a sublation of the minority in the majority state group, then contrary to what I have argued, reconciliation and recognition are actually highly compatible. The pivot lies in our understanding of the structure of recognition, specifically, whether it is inherently sublatory too. Beneath the alleged differences concerning notions of justice between Fraser's and Honneth's models of recognition – Fraser's self-alleged procedural justice and Honneth's self-avowed substantive justice – is how even the thinnest notion of justice calls for two sides – the recognized and the recogniser; here, the colonised and their colonizer(s) – to enter a relationship of negotiation or consent.<sup>52</sup>

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52 Fraser understands her project to be undergirded by a procedural form of justice she terms participatory parity. Because claims to redistribution-and-recognition are adjudicated through “democratic processes of public debate,” participatory parity regulates democratic discussion of “the good” via “social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers” (N. Fraser and A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, cit., pp. 36, 43). Fraser understands her proposal's adherence to procedural justice to stand apart from Honneth's self-avowedly thicker, substantive justice that undergirds his project of recognition. Both agree that substantive liberals prescribe a notion of the good life and remain in the realm of the ethical. But here I side with Honneth: Fraser's notion of participatory parity is closer to Honneth's substantive justice than she argues, because even procedural liberalism, including participatory parity, necessarily harbours some notion of the ethical; it cannot “be filled out without the help of ethical considerations” (A. Honneth, *Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice*, in “Acta Sociologica”, 47, 4, 2004, pp. 351-364, here p. 357).

This observation that recognition entails an ushering into an ethical relationship is not new.<sup>53</sup>

What I hope to have shown in my essay is that the structure of reconciliation—its tendency towards unity or sublation—accompanied by its being both precondition and manifestation of recognition, implies that recognition is much narrower than liberal theorists might have thought. Indeed, even Muldoon, citing postcolonial theorist Glen Coulthard, remarked in 2018 about the possibility of Australian Indigenous peoples “opting out of the late-colonial system of rule through recognition”.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, if reconciliation tends towards sublation, there seems to be a fundamental impasse between the inherent unificatory logic of an apology/forgiveness and the extreme possibility of secession. In short, I hope to have demonstrated the necessity of a rethinking of recognition.

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53 J. Maclure, *The Politics of Recognition at an Impasse ? Identity Politics and Democratic Citizenship*, in “Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique”, 36, 1, 2003, pp. 3-21; E. Renault, *What Is the Use of the Notion of the Struggle of Recognition?*, in “Revista de Ciencia Política”, 27, 2, 2007, pp. 195-206.

54 P. Muldoon, *Forget Recognition?*, cit., p. 27.

# CAN RIOTS BE DEMOCRATIC?

## On the fight for recognition via Violent means

Philip Højme

### *Abstract*

This essay seeks to examine D’Arcy’s notion of *sound militancy* to discern whether this term can be fruitfully applied to establishing rioting (riots) as a democratic form of resistance to injustice or negligence. The first part of the essay provides an account of Frazer and Hutchings’ critique of political violence, a critique that perceives violence (used in politics or for political aims) as *never being justifiable*. In opposition to this position, the second part of the essay posits, through both theoretical (Marcuse, Celikates) and practical (Soei, Sutterlüty) references, the case for an understanding of political violence (riots) as justifiable or defensible in certain circumstances – those that adhere to D’Arcy’s concept of sound militancy and seek to address a particular and present grievance. In conclusion, the essay suggests that (Hegelian) recognition provides an account of why marginalizing seems so pervasive in contemporary Western societies.

*Keywords:* Democracy, Grievance, Recognition, Riot, Violence.

### *It begins with the oppressed*

This essay begins with a short outline of a theoretical position against violence as a justifiable political means. Following this, I engage with D’Arcy’s *Languages of the Unheard*.<sup>1</sup> A book which develops an argument similar to Marcuse’s claim that “there is a ‘natural right’ of resistance for oppressed and overpowered minorities to use extralegal means if the legal ones have proved to be inadequate [...] if they use violence, they do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one”.<sup>2</sup> Having made the point that violence is a justifiable political means (in certain circumstances), the essay continues with an examination of a limited

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1 D’Arcy 2013.

2 Marcuse 1965, pp. 81-117.

selection of contemporary riots; the 1992 riots in the USA, the 2005 riots in France, the 2008 riots in Denmark, the 2011 riots in the UK, and the land defence of Kanehsatá:ke (also known as the Oka crisis). D'Arcy's concept of *sound militancy* provides a theoretical framework for stipulating the democratic nature of militant protests. I conclude the essay by suggesting Butler's notions of precarious and grievable lives as a potential framework for drawing out novel nuances in D'Arcy's argument. This juxtaposition leads to a summary of the essay within a Hegelian framework. Before concluding this introduction, allow me briefly to make two notes in relation to the terminology used. The term society used here designates both government and non-government entities, which, through laws, a monopoly on violence and media coverage, dictate the normative standards for what is conceived as socially acceptable behaviour. The term minority are used for any group or groups situated either on the margins or completely demarcated from society for various reasons (economic, ethnic, racial, and so on). However, it is not within the scope of this essay to engage in a thorough discussion of these terms.

### *Against the compatibility of violence and democracy*

Allow me to begin by outlining a position that is influential because it provides a critique of positions that will be taken up later (and thus provides a point of departure against which this essay can take its shape). In *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* (2019) Frazer and Hutchings set out to examine and subsequently dismiss the notion that political violence can be justified. Their dismissal was followed up the subsequent year with the claim that “[t]o fight violence with violence is not to challenge it but to endorse it [...] Evidence suggest that the normalisation of violence in response to violence [...] is far more dangerous than a commitment to fighting violence otherwise”.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of brevity, the following deals exclusively with the former book.

Frazer and Hutchings provide a critique of the justification of the consequentialist position in favour of violent action revolves around the claim that to allow some “political actors”<sup>4</sup> to engage in violence for the sake of “justice” introduce a degree of ambivalence and thus opens up for discussion what counts as a justifiable *telos*. The consequentialist position holds

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3 Frazer, Hutchings 2020, p. 190.

4 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, pp. 13-23.

that whether or not violence is justifiable is determined based on the consequences of the violent acts.

However, since the term justice is often contested among the wide variety of political actors engaged in both parliamentary and grass-roots politics it is, according to Frazer and Hutchings, doubtful whether or not this position can provide a political (ideal) justification for the use of violence in politics. Particularly since the discrepancy between a battleplan and the actuality of violent acts can be taken as yet another argument against using violence to achieve one's goals – “things can go wrong, and the expected (or hoped-for) consequences might not transpire”.<sup>5</sup>

Having dismissed the consequentialist position, Frazer and Hutchings move on to dismiss the notion that violence *in* the historical situation (the actuality of life) can be a necessary action for righting a wrong. Such a position can be found in the above-mentioned quote from Marcuse's important essay on repressive tolerance. Frazer and Hutchings frame their critique of this position in relation to Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir and Fanon, rather than Marcuse. It is, however, the case that both “[m]arxist and existentialist thinkers emphasize that such value judgements [which violent acts we judge as “stylish” and which as “ugly”] trade productively on ambiguity”.<sup>6</sup>

Distinguishing between three justifications of the necessity for violent action: strategic (“violence [...] motivated by a desire to further distinctively political goods [...] such as order, liberty and prosperity”),<sup>7</sup> virtue (“violence that displays characteristics of judgement, courage and resilience in the face of [...] one's own [...] defeat”),<sup>8</sup> and lastly, aesthetic (“violence is stylish or tragic [...] political impresario, or the heroic assertion [...] in the face of overwhelming odds”),<sup>9</sup> Frazer and Hutchings argue (towards the end of their book) “our ethical and political attention should be on the world that violence instantiates, as opposed to the world it is supposed to produce”.<sup>10</sup> Following from this claim, there is no recourse but the dismissal of political violence *qua* its “complicit[y] with the conditions that enable political violence to flourish”.<sup>11</sup> Against this position, I must voice my doubts, and this essay will seek to show (by way of examples)

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5 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 19.

6 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 70.

7 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 58.

8 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 58.

9 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, pp. 58-59.

10 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 59.

11 Frazer, Hutchings 2019, p. 121.

how political violence (in some circumstances) is a necessary condition for marginalized groups in gaining political recognition. Additionally, concerning stipulating any clear-cut distinction between *kinds of violence* (as Frazer and Hutchings do) does not mean that violence is *partout* wrong or unethical. Instead, this ambiguity could potentially be imagined as a point of departure for a productive discussion of *when, where and how* violence could function as a politically viable option.

*For a nuanced understanding of violence as being democratic*

D'Arcy suggests that the term *sound militancy* is useful for distinguishing between rational and irrational militancy. Furthermore, D'Arcy posits that the defence of Kanehsatá:ke constitutes a prime example of sound militancy. In defence of their land, local Mohawks began a confrontation with local police and the Canadian Armed Forces in Quebec, Canada, which lasted from July 11 to September 26, 1990, resulting in one fatality and around 100 injured.<sup>12</sup> D'Arcy states that there are four characteristics inherent to this defence which can be extrapolated as conditions necessary for deeming any form of militancy sound. D'Arcy describes these four characteristics as

1. The Mohawks had a sound grievance that they had already tried without success to resolve by means of discussion [...]
2. This action was led by the people most affected by the grievance, [...]
3. The effect of the action was to empower the community to govern itself autonomously [...]
4. The land defenders acted, at every stage of the process, in ways that they could defend to reasonable people, appealing to considerations of common decency and the common good.<sup>13</sup>

According to D'Arcy, all four characteristics were fulfilled before the Mohawks took up arms in defence of their land. It was within their rights to use violence towards police attempting to disperse peaceful protesters who had barricaded the construction site of a local golf course that encroached on a sacred burial site. This defence of their right to use violence is a comment on the fact that all earlier attempts to persuade the local government to ban the expansion had failed. As such, we must understand the choice of taking up arms as a last resort to make their grievances heard. According to Marcuse, this was not even an escalation of the situation. Instead, the

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12 See Obomsawin 1993.

13 D'Arcy 2013, pp. 62-64.



Mohawks were left with no other choice, and only by taking up arms were they able to enhance their democratic possibilities within a system lacking sensitivity towards their initial plight. D'Arcy states that sound militancy is capable of giving a minority "new opportunities to resolve substantive and pressing grievances".<sup>14</sup>

D'Arcy and Marcuse agree that the use of extralegal force (i.e. violence perpetrated by an entity not sanctioned to do so by the State) by an oppressed minority can often be a last resort in an attempt to create 'new opportunities' for being heard. What is particularly interesting here is Marcuse's suggestion that this use of violence ought not to be understood as an initiation, but rather as a continuation of the violence to which society already subjects these minorities. In the case of the land defence of Kanehsatá:ke, this means that the differing accounts of who fired the first shots become less important, since the expansion of the golf course and neglecting the Mohawk grievances can now be conceived of as initiating the chain of events that led to those shots being fired. Marcuse's claim even maintains that had the protesters fired the first shot: they would only have continued the violence, not started it. Such an argument provides us with a nuanced understanding of violence which relies less on the necessity of it being physical and more on its psychological and structural aspects. Additionally, D'Arcy argues that the community of Kanehsatá:ke had previously tried to negotiate with the local government and that their opting to blockade the construction site was a tactic implicitly 'forced' on them due to the lack of recognition of their grievances. The actual situation on July 11, which led to the firefight between the Mohawks and the local police, was prompted when the local police force decided to use both tear-gas and shock grenades to breach the barricades around the construction site. The brief firefight lasted 15 minutes and left one officer dead.

By escalating the situation, the protesters were able to force a new paradigm on the stalled negotiations – they were able to force other actors to interfere, and this interference proved, in the end, to be beneficial to their cause (in the end the federal government's threat of monetary loss forced the local government to halt the expansion and sell the land to the federal government). The violence used during this defence was thus pivotal in forcing the local government back to the negotiation table. Hence, the escalation of the situation gave the protesters a real opportunity to make their voice heard. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to posit that these actions

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14 D'Arcy 2013, pp. 65.

were a major cause of the successful conclusion of the Mohawks' political agenda. Had the protesters not resorted to this violence, their efforts would probably have been in vain.

If we take a look at the situation before the day of the incident, we can see how the escalation came in stages. The first stage can be characterized by the Mohawks trying to halt the expansion through the local political structure. When this was not possible, they proceeded to barricade the construction site in order to force the politicians to return to negotiations. When this second attempt failed, the Mohawks resisted the police breaching their barricades with chemical and explosive weapons, a reasonable form of resistance as they were left with no other options. Hence, it is easy to see how the Mohawks were incrementally forced to 'up the ante' if their grievances were not to remain unacknowledged by the local government. This example clearly shows that D'Arcy's notion of sound militancy is a useful term for examining acts of violence perpetrated by non-state groups.

In the following section, this term will be used to examine a limited selection of riots. D'Arcy concludes the book with the statement that "rioting may serve as a vehicle for fostering social inclusion and civic equality",<sup>15</sup> a statement that provides us with grounds for attempting the aforementioned examination. The particular point stressed by D'Arcy is that rioting *can* serve as a way to give a (political) voice to those who have been muted by the political majority, by the state, or by the media. Hence, by giving a voice to the voiceless, who, having exhausted all other possibilities of voicing their grievances, have become compelled to resort to a violent refusal of the *status quo*, which marginalizes them.

However, before moving on to an examination of specific accounts of rioting, a short elaboration on this term and its associated political means or actions is in order. The federal Anti-Riot Act of 1968 defines the term 'riot' "[as] a public disturbance involving (1) an act or acts of violence [...] or (2) a threat or threats of the commission of an act or acts of violence".<sup>16</sup> Hence, riots are often distinguished from civil disobedience by a qualitative reference to violent acts or threats.<sup>17</sup> This definition has, however, been rejected in reference to

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15 D'Arcy 2013, p. 140.

16 U.S. Code. 'Title 18, Chapter 102, §2102'. Legal Information Institute (Cornell Law School). 11 April 1968. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2102>. Accessed 27.03.2021.

17 Celikates 2014, pp. 213-218.

a notorious series of cases, [where] German courts have in the past ruled that it constitutes an act of violent coercion incompatible with peaceful protest to exert psychological pressure on others [...] by blocking the road and thus forcing them to stop their cars in order to avoid an accident. Equally, the American Civil Rights Movement has often been criticized as violent on account of the violence its ‘nonviolent’ protests have (intentionally and for strategic reasons) provoked on the part of the state’s security apparatus.<sup>18</sup>

While I do acknowledge that a universal account of the legal definition of riots is impossible, the above definition serves the purpose of providing a point of departure for a critique of the notion that riots (and political violence) are *never justifiable*.

[G]overnments pursue a tactic of divide and conquer [...] portraying and celebrating certain forms of protest as good [...] and labeling and repressing other forms of protest – often those of marginalized groups – as violent, uncivil, and criminal [...] we should therefore insist that civility is quite compatible with a variety of actions often classified as violent by the media and the state.<sup>19</sup>

With this statement, Celikates muddies Frazer and Hutchings rejection of a justification of political violence.<sup>20</sup> By now, it should be clear that during the Oka crisis, the instigation of armed violence must be attributed as a decisive factor in overturning the decision by the local city council to expand the golf course (in the end, the federal government purchased the land in question so that it could be left undisturbed). If immanent violence or the threat thereof is a condition for acts being classified as a riot, and if (according to liberal political theory) civil disobedience is delineated from a riot precisely by it being a non-violent form of acts already at the margins of what is legally acceptable, then it becomes questionable if Frazer and Hutchings argument would even allow for the latter kinds of acts. In the following, I will therefore use the term riot, as opposed to civil disobedience precisely because the four instances of my case study utilized violence as the *prima facie* mode of political engagement with the institutions that had, similarly to the Oka crisis, refused to hear the grievances of the marginalized groups in question.

Before concluding this section, it is necessary to prefigure the following with a short elaboration on the two interrelated notions of violence as *jus-*

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18 Celikates 2014, p. 214.

19 Celikates 2014, p. 67.

20 For a more radical defence of the ‘right’ to riot see: Hart 2015.

*tifiable* and *democratic*. Justifiable violence is those form of non-governmental violence that conforms with D'Arcy's characteristics of sound militancy (riots, civil disobedience, and so on). On the other hand, democratic violence are violent forms of resistance whose primary goal is to increase a minority's democratic right to have their grievances acknowledged. To have their mistreatments and abuses recognized in a manner that respects their experiences. Democratic violence aims to force those who have wronged a minority to acknowledge their wrongdoing and seek to rectify the situation. However, this brief description of justifiable and democratic violence does not aim to describe these in a precise manner. Instead, the description is only preliminary and aims to facilitate the reader in seeing the nuances, overlaps, and future possibilities in the case studies in the next section of this essay.

### *Riots, a contemporary democratic right*

By examining the riots mentioned in the introduction, this section aims to assess whether or not these riots could be classified as instances of sound militancy. At this point, I would, however, like to briefly remark upon the title of this section and D'Arcy's and Marcuse's claims. Both of these thinkers insist that it is rational for minorities to meet the State (i.e. the majority) with extralegal means if their grievances are not heard.

It is, however, not the case that D'Arcy sees all riots as being viable democratic acts. D'Arcy stresses that riots should not be rejected as democratic actions "when they are defensible [...] [but that we must be prepared to] condemn them, when they are not".<sup>21</sup> Refuting a common liberal critique stating that extralegal "militancy is undemocratic because it is coercive",<sup>22</sup> D'Arcy posits that riots might not be undemocratic through and through because of their ability to weaken "the capacity of elites and institutions to thwart reason-guided public discussion from dictating the terms of social co-operation".<sup>23</sup> By refusing this liberal critique, D'Arcy provides us with a viable theory to give us a more nuanced understanding of the actions of rioters.

D'Arcy's characteristics, which separate sound from unsound militancy, make it possible to provide an argument for riots that is not liable to the lib-

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21 D'Arcy 2013, p. 141.

22 D'Arcy 2013, p. 37.

23 D'Arcy 2013, p. 71.

eral critique. Clearly, D'Arcy never attempts to argue that everyone has the right to engage in extralegal violence. Rather, that in certain very specific situations (those which comply with the necessary characteristics), some marginalised groups may find themselves 'forced' into a corner where their survival (i.e. the survival of their needs and wishes) would not be secured if they did not resort to violence as a last resort.

Another response to the liberal critique of riots can be gleaned from Marcuse's notion of *repressive tolerance*, a term similar to D'Arcy's general claim. Repressive tolerance seeks to resolve the paradox within liberal theory of everyone's equal right to be heard, which becomes problematic as it is often used to protect those who commit hate speech. Marcuse's main argument for a repressive tolerance (a form of tolerance which is repressive towards certain voices without being undemocratic) is that any tolerant society must necessarily promote the repression of some groups.

Marcuse might be criticised for simply propagating the reverse argument of this critique; however, this is a misrepresentation of Marcuse's actual claim. The argument goes well beyond the simple dichotomy between tolerance and intolerance. Since Marcuse is prepared to accept intolerance towards intolerance in those circumstances where it increases the overall tolerance of society towards minority groups, this suggests a critique of the classical liberal understanding of tolerance which solves the problem of – *tolerance towards whom?* There can be no need for tolerance towards a majority, precisely because they are the majority and are not, therefore, subjected to any will but their own. Leaving this digression aside, let us now move on to examine D'Arcy's characteristics of sound militancy and their taxonomy of riots.

D'Arcy offers a taxonomy of riots which concludes that only one of the four proposed kinds of riots are democratically defensible. Closely connected to sound militancy, the defensible riot is a riot where the rioters are members of the community affected by the grievance which gave rise to the rioting (D'Arcy 'logically' calls this form of rioting: *grievance riots*). Such a riot is, above all, defensible because it empowers the community to practise self-governance, and the actions of the rioters appeal to everyone's right to be treated decently and to the common good of the community affected by the grievance.

The remaining three indefensible riots are the acquisitive, recreational and authoritarian riots. Which I will briefly describe before moving on an elaborate examination of grievance riots.

Recreational riots are often associated with football derbies (e.g. West Ham United against Millwall), while the authoritarian riot is exemplified

by the Independence Day march in Warsaw on November 11th 2013, during which the rioters turned to widespread vandalism towards shops and a LGBTQ+ art installation.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, acquisition riots, strictly speaking, serve no other purpose than looting for the sake of enriching oneself. This taxonomy is, however, not as strict as it might seem in the above description, and riots often contain a multiplicity of elements associated with each kind of riot. A case in point are the US and English riots, which turned into acquisitive riots at some point.<sup>25</sup>

Two years after the defence of Kanehsatá:ke, Los Angeles experienced massive rioting after the police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King were acquitted. The riots lasted four to five days and cost 63 people their lives. Hearing about such violent riots, outsiders are often perplexed by what caused them, and some might even claim that the riots were a clear overreaction due to the subsequent death toll. These are, however, simplistic understandings of the event and disjoined from other events preceding it. Instead, we ought to inquire into the assault on King as the catalyst which ignited a pyre already doused with gasoline. D’Arcy writes that “[f]or most, the rioting was directed against the impunity of the LA police, which for decades had targeted racial minorities for abuse, assault, and humiliation, not exceptionally or in the single case of Rodney King, but persistently and routinely”.<sup>26</sup> Something which all of the riots we will examine here have in common.

Similar to the LA riots, both the French (2005) and English (2011) riots started when, respectively, two young men of Magheralin (North African) descent and a “dark-skinned man”<sup>27</sup> were killed by the police. In both of these instances “[t]he rioters invoked [...] [a] demand for equality and equal treatment as citizens”.<sup>28</sup> To keep the examination of these two riots brief, a single interview with rioters from each riot will suffice to underline the above claim. The first interview captures the anger which this individual feels towards the police – the individual describes a stop-and-search which happened to this 13-year-old – “[I] was stopped by two police officers who then proceeded to have a conversation with one another: ‘One of them said: Mate, why don’t you ask him where Saddam is. [...] The interviewee continues: ‘They’re supposed to be the law enforcement. I don’t hate the policing system, I hate the police on the streets. I hate them

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24 Goettig, Florkiewicz 2013.

25 For a defence of looting during grievance riots see: Vasquez 2014.

26 D’Arcy 2013, p. 148.

27 Sutterlüty 2014, pp. 39-40.

28 Sutterlüty 2014, p. 46.

from the bottom of my heart”<sup>29</sup>. The second interview, or slogan, shows how during the French riot, participants focused on the rights unavailable to them, even though these are the rights of all French citizens. “‘Liberté, égalité, fraternité, mais pas dans les cités’ – ‘Liberty, equality, fraternity, but not on the outskirts!’ – was a slogan often heard during the unrest in France”<sup>30</sup>. Thus, what brings these three riots together is a disenchantment with the treatment of minorities by the police.

I will now turn to the 2008 riots in Denmark, which differ slightly from the others only in the fact that they were sparked neither by a death nor by physical beatings. Instead, these riots were instigated by the pent-up anger which exploded as a result of racial profiling. While the riots originated in Copenhagen, they would spread to other cities, such as Aarhus, Aalborg, Odense. The main source for my examination of this is Aydin Soei’s book *Angry Young Men – Riots and the Fight for Recognition in a New Denmark*<sup>31</sup> (my translation). This is an important work because of the breadth of its examination of these riots and what caused them (it quotes a wide variety of sources – local police officers,<sup>32</sup> social workers, and rioters – and contextualises the riots in relation to the newly-created stop-and-search zones).<sup>33</sup>

A very powerful quote from a social worker recalls reporting to the authorities that “you have crossed a line with these stop-and-search zones [...] [the social worker then proceeds to describe the situation as] chaotic and we warned against the possibility that the situation would evolve in a dangerous direction”<sup>34</sup>. The effect of these stop-and-search zones was an increase in tension between those who, because of either where they lived or how they looked (their ethnicity), came to feel that they were targeted for stop-and-search more than the average citizen (Soei 2011, 29). This was even known to local police officers, one of whom states that “it was not the searches in themselves that were the problem. It was rather the way

29 Guardian and LSE, 2011, 19; Klein 2012, p. 137, in Sutterlüty 2014, p. 48.

30 Castel 2006, p. 788, in Sutterlüty 2014, p. 46.

31 See Soei 2011. To the best of my knowledge, this book is only available in Danish.

32 These are officers who work from a smaller police station often situated in the areas they patrol. The officers are often tasked with patrolling and community-related duties.

33 In this particular context, in Denmark, stop-and-search zones (in Danish *visitationszoner*, lit. visitation zones) are zones where the police can stop and search people and vehicles without first having to charge the person with a crime.

34 Soei 2011, p. 30. Translation mine: “I er gået for langt med de her visitationszoner [...] Der var kaos, og vi advarede om, at det her kunne udvikle sig i en farlig retning”.

they were talked to and that they were stripped on the street that made it problematic”.<sup>35</sup> The latter part of this conduct (strip-searching in public) was, and still is, in contradiction to the Danish police code (as such it is it an illegal action warranting reparation). As another interviewee puts it, “multiple times I have told young people: why don’t you complain about it? ‘Nothing happens when we do’ they replied. ‘The police always win’”.<sup>36</sup> What this shows is a situation where a group has come to find themselves so marginalised and thus completely disillusioned with the system and its procedures that they have given up. They have no trust that the system will handle their complaints objectively, and therefore no way of having their grievances heard.

### *Grief and the recognition of precarious lives*

In the previous section, we have seen how the selected riots had a shared reason for their instigation, and it seems that all four riots are compliant with D’Arcy’s necessary characteristics for sound militancy. In the case of the Danish riots, however, it is interesting that the riots managed to create a dialogue with the police and that this dialogue altered the conduct of the police (at least for a short while). Soei writes that the riots

succeeded [... and] at the end of the riots in February the police and youth from Blågårdskvateret [an area in Copenhagen where the riots began] started a dialogue which led to a discontinuation of the public strip searches by the small number of officers who practised this. This meant that young people felt that their voice was acknowledged and heard.<sup>37</sup>

In relation to the fourth characteristic, that the riot can be deemed reasonable by an appeal to decency and the common good, the above warrants a separate examination. It is quite reasonable to assume that any rational person would perceive these riots as, at least initially, justified

35 Soei 2011, p. 29. Translation mine: “det var ikke selve kontrollerne, der var problemet. Det var måden, der blev talt til dem på og aflædningerne midt på gaden, der gjorde forskellen”.

36 Soei 2011, p. 29. Translation mine: “Jeg har flere gange sagt til de unge: så klag da over det? ‘Der sker jo ikke en skid,’ siger de. ‘Politiet får alligevel ret’”.

37 Soei 2011, p. 29. Translation mine: “lykkes [...] ved slutningen af optøjerne i februar politiet og de unge fra Blågårdskvateret at indgå i en dialog, der førte til, at det mindretal af betjente, der aflædte unge på gaden stoppede med denne praksis, og til at de unge følte, at deres stemme blev anerkendt som værd at lytte til”.



because the systematic racism to which the rioters were subjected clearly constitutes an infringement on their rights. Not everyone will agree with this, however. Riots like these are therefore always at risk of further antagonising either the State or of widening the divide between the rioters and the public. The latter is a particular risk if we take into account the role that the media can play in portraying riots to the audience as violent hooligans. Such portrayals are common amongst right-wing media and politicians, who often portray rioters as attacking the foundation of the State and cultural norms of society itself, while the left, on the other hand, often jump the gun in their attempts to conceptualize the riots within their own political-ideological framework.

The notion of grievance seems to play an integral part in D'Arcy's argument. For this reason, it seems interesting to open the door for an exploration of Butler's notion of grievability concerning the notion of grievance riots. In *Frames of War* (2009), Butler describes how societal norms can delegate precariousness to groups "whose lives are not 'regarded' as potentially grievable [...] [whose lives are thus] made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and [...] exposure to violence and death".<sup>38</sup>

Both precariousness and grievability are, therefore, concepts which can be utilized as describing the lives of the rioters. These marginalised groups, and particularly their lives, have become precarious because of the lack of recognition of their grievances. This was the case in all four riots, as well as in the case of the defence of Kanehsatá:ke, where the community was not only ignored, but their culture and connection to their past came under attack. By employing Butler's notions of precariousness and grievability, D'Arcy's argument becomes more nuanced regarding its understanding of how grievances play a role in contemporary society.

In the case of the riots we have looked at, we can interpret the frustration of the rioters as a reaction to society's treatment of them. It was not only the fact that they felt like second-class citizens but also that they were designated as dispensable by society. Butler describes elsewhere this experienced lack of institutional protection as people being un-grievable. Butler writes that "[if] I have no certainty that I will have food or shelter, or that no social network or institution would catch me if I fall, then I come to belong to the un-grievable".<sup>39</sup> While beyond the current scope of this essay, an interesting discussion could be developed by examining the four cases above using

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38 Butler 2009, p. 25.

39 Butler 2009, p. 197.

Butler's concepts within a broader discussion of agency versus responsibility. This examination might successfully answer questions of the following sort. *Who has agency during a riot or land defence? How does violence impact or enhance their agency? Which responsibilities can be attributed to those without agency and those with? Do governments have a particular responsibility for certain groups marginalized or lacking agency?*

Recognition, of vulnerability or one's life, therefore, seems to provide a schema for conceptualizing whether or not a riot has been successful in creating a space for the actualization of previously unheard grievances. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (2018, pp. 108-116) Hegel describes how the subjectivity of the master is conditioned on the subjection of the servant. While this enables the master to become a self-sufficient consciousness, it also ties the master to the servant. In fact, the master comes to rely on the servant for all their 'bodily' needs. The master's carefree life is only attainable because someone else ploughs the fields. In other words, society needs those it marginalizes to sustain it, and it is this dependence that gives the vocalization of the 'servants' grievances a threatening ring to it.

What this means is that while the city council (in the case of the *Oka crisis*) had no need for the holy sites of the local tribe, it can be questioned whether society would function if these people did not partake in the day-to-day grind. The blockage of the construction site is exactly such an example of the *hoi polloi* breaking the ossified norms of socially accepted behaviour. By doing so the masses are able to halt the proverbial hamster-wheel and provide an occasion for their grievances to be heard.

This is only part of the story, however. Because it follows (as shown above) that disturbances like these cannot be tolerated by the society against which this violence is directed. This brings to light an important paradox in contemporary societies. Namely, that it is only by positioning themselves in opposition to a normative society that marginalized groups have a chance of making themselves and their grievances heard. Such acts do, however, question the validity of the *status quo*, which in turn, breaks the spell of contemporary society. 'Declarations of war' such as these are, on the one hand, met with punitive measures that seek to expel them (for their transgressions), and on the other hand, with measures that seek to integrate them into contemporary culture. By attempting to be acknowledged as well as positing a radical difference from society, socially marginalized groups will often find themselves engaged in a (Hegelian) struggle for recognition where the victor enslaves the defeated, while at the same time providing the conditions for the emancipation of the latter.

Therefore, a ‘successful’ riot might constitute, within the proposed Hegelian framework, a political action that conjures into being the political potentiality of a marginalized or abjected group. Nevertheless, by becoming unified with the Other (society), those previously marginalized or abjected enter into a new relationship with their ‘enemies’. There is no guarantee that this new constellation will not revert to abjection or marginalization of some new Other – of someone else.

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## REVIEWS



Pio Colonnello, *Sinestesie e anamorfismi. Tra filosofia e letteratura*, Mimesis, Milano 2021, pp. 145, ISBN 9788857572604 [Leonardo Distaso]

L'intento dell'autore di questo prezioso volume è quello di utilizzare alcune figure retoriche "di mezzo" per approfondirne la valenza speculativa, al di là della loro specificità semantica. Il titolo indica chiaramente quali figure siano oggetto del testo. Ma perché sono figure "di mezzo"? Perché sia la sinestesia che l'anamorfose attraversano territori senza soffermarsi su ciò che è saldo e sicuro; lasciano i punti fermi per inoltrarsi nelle pieghe degli incroci, delle vie di mezzo, degli spazi ambigui e multiformi. Le sinestesie lavorano sulle similitudini, abbracciano l'ambito del simile che non si riduce all'uguale, mettono alla prova la facoltà mimetica rafforzandola nel suo potere trasformativo. Tuttavia esse non devono perdere mai il contatto con il sensibile se vogliono raggiungere quell'altezza speculativa che non si areni nell'astratto e che risulti in grado di rendere conto dell'ambito a cui l'autore rimanda con convinzione: la poesia. D'altra parte, anche l'anamorfose diventa per Colonnello uno strumento speculativo: anche con essa egli si avventura nei sentieri delle "terre di mezzo", negli interstizi che si frappongono tra le immagini, nelle deformazioni che gettano luce sulle formazioni. Seguendo le indicazioni proprie dell'indirizzo fenomenologico, Colonnello prende le distanze da ogni prospettiva naturalistica, ancora una volta per non assecondare una banale interpretazione "a prima vista" di ciò che nasconde e poi rivela la sua trascendenza. Tutto il libro è la ricerca di quel giusto punto di vista in grado di vedere l'oggetto (poetico) nonostante la deformazione prospettica propria dell'anamorfose, per poi scoprire, nel reiterato incontro con il sorprendente, che proprio quelle deformazioni anamorfiche formano sempre di nuovo ciò che si lascia in eredità alla trascendenza e ciò che questa lascia in eredità.

Per sviluppare queste trame Colonnello si lascia guidare da una costellazione di figure che diventano tracce da seguire più che capitoli di storia. Il percorso somiglia a un itinerario di detection. In primis si parte da Borges e dalla figura del labirinto borgesiano. Il labirinto è associato alla danza e ai possibili: il movimento circolare della danza accompagna quello del vagare nel labirinto, e il vago cammino nel labirinto rappresenta l'illimitato orizzonte dei possibili, sconosciuti e non conoscibili, che solo nell'incrocio eventuale del tempo diventano realtà che viene incontro. La sorpresa è dietro l'angolo e vaga è l'intenzione di prepararsi ad accoglierla. Da Eleusi a Omero, da Cnosso fino a Zarathustra, il labirinto è il luogo della danza circolare, della danza eternamente narrata in un tempo vivamente vissuto. In Borges ciò finisce per assumere la forma del tango, nel *volver* e nel *de*

*nuevo* del tango milonga, del tornare e ritornare del tempo nello spazio estatico della calda attesa. Il tango diventa la lingua del labirinto. Il percorso attraverso gli scritti di Borges compiuto da Colonnello somiglia a quello labirintico di Borges stesso. Tocca le insidie dello scetticismo humiano e berkeleyano e approda alla husserliana coscienza interna del tempo: l'esito sempre anamorfico non si discosta dalla verità che il possibile è sempre e solo temporale, e che solo la temporalità racchiude in sé l'orizzonte dei possibili. La ricerca della temporalità fa tutt'uno con l'incontro con i possibili. La dimostrazione avviene quasi per assurdo grazie al richiamo all'idea borgesiana di reversibilità del tempo vissuta dal protagonista de *El milagro secreto*, Jadomir Hladik, e presente anche in *Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain*. Certo, nell'enigmatico intreccio tra "futuri possibili" e "passati possibili" precipita l'eventuale definizione di un ontologico presente che oscilla tra realtà e simulacro, ma sappiamo che a Borges questo precipitato non va vissuto come un lutto, bensì come un'ulteriore apertura di possibilità verso un eterno come illimitato dilatarsi dell'istante che non teme i simulacri e non cade sulle rocce ontologiche. Come ci ricorda Colonnello, Borges nella *Historia del la eternidad* concepisce una visione poetica e profetica del tempo presente in cui si raccoglie la memoria attualizzata del passato: una rammemorazione illuminante del passato vissuta nel presente di due istanti lontani temporalmente e uniti nella visione.

Non poteva mancare un riferimento all'*Unheimliche*, questa volta giocato nel confronto tra lo Heidegger delle *Vorlesungen* e il Freud del *Perturbante*. Qui Colonnello ripercorre esiti e prospettive di questo confronto sottolineando come proprio nel cammino verso l'estranea terra del tramonto compiuto dallo straniero (*das Fremde*) si apre la prospettiva dell'abitare in quanto migrare, del divenire-casa nell'estraneità e nel dovere dell'ospitalità. Qui i riferimenti sono molteplici: oltre i due autori suddetti, attraversando studi recenti, si risale fino a Arendt, Kant e su, fino ai modelli di cittadinanza ebraici e romani. Colonnello insiste su un punto: abitare non è avere ma essere, essere ospite straniero e ospitare lo straniero per ritrovare la comune parola poetica amica. Abitare non è un possesso, ma il suo contrario; non è un errare senza prospettiva, ma un peregrinare la cui prospettiva è il cammino che non arriva mai.

Altro passo verso il riscatto della parola poetica è quello seguito sulle tracce di Catherine Pozzi, lette attraverso la lente di Michel De Certeau. Qui il racconto di Colonnello si rivolge alla dimensione mistica del corpo: la danza mistica trova corpo nel poema che dà forma anamorfica all'identificazione di corpo e linguaggio. Il sensibile diventa fondamento del concettuale e la metafora del viaggio invita a percorrere una strada senza fine dove



la mèta è il perdersi per ritrovarsi in seno alla parola. Certo, è una parola muta che sostiene la traccia della perdita e sopporta il lutto della perdita di sé, una parola che si lascia essere preda di un'esperienza impossibile al di là di ogni conflitto e di ogni bisogno. Dalla mistica non possiamo pretendere che essa spieghi le cose del mondo: essa le lascia essere per rifugiarsi nella sparizione dell'anonimo e per morire lentamente estinguendosi pian piano in una vita falsa che pensa di essere quella autentica entro i confini di una *pietas* tutta interiore.

Diverso il tenore della lettura di *A Liuba che parte*, lirica di Eugenio Montale da *Le occasioni*. La chiave è la relazione necessità-miracolo, immanenza-trascendenza. Il momento del miracolo, come apertura alla trascendenza, non ha qui carattere mistico: i temi già affrontati dello spaesamento, del migrare, della perdita, si riannodano in quella che Colonnello ipotizza essere una trascendenza di salvezza custodita nella leggerezza di fronte all'abisso. Liuba abita il luogo dei suoi ricordi con la leggerezza di chi incontra nell'istante il "non ancora" provenendo dal "non più"; il suo ritratto anamorfico è illuminato dalla luce obliqua di chi è consapevole della tragedia del tempo e, insieme, porta con sé il desiderio di vivere passi ulteriori, ciò che chiamiamo futuro. Rispetto alla scomparsa di sé nel mistico ed evanescente paesaggio della Pozzi, questa di Montale appare una dimensione più vitale e, forse per questo, più sincera, a patto che il miracolo non venga visto come un'insincera rottura della necessità, ma come un'aurorale forma di scetticismo nei confronti proprio di ogni pretesa di necessità che chiuderebbe la vita in una spirale senza via d'uscita. L'unica necessità rimane, appunto, quella della trascendenza.

I passi ulteriori affrontano il tema del corpo glorioso della tradizione cristiana, la cui bellezza è racchiusa nel rapimento e nell'estasi. Qui Colonnello passa in rassegna l'esperienza mistica di Gertrude di Helfta, Ildegarda di Bingen, Teresa D'Avila, per soffermarsi sulla riflessione di Unamuno, di Dostoevskij e di Simone Weil alla ricerca del senso della bellezza della sofferenza scaturita da una *pietas* che riabilita il passato nel kairotico momento della *parousia*. La lezione di Camus è appresa per intero: la profonda tristezza è vinta attraverso la "vittoria della pietra" che si tramuta in soffio leggero del vento inafferrabile che coltiva di nuovo la speranza che un giorno la bellezza potrà ancora salvare il mondo.

La seconda parte del testo raccoglie una serie di letture fenomenologiche. Le lezioni husserliane del 1906-07 sulla coscienza interna del tempo sono il faro che indica la rotta. Colonnello insegue le tracce lasciate da Husserl riguardo alla costituzione della temporalità attraverso gli atti percettivi o, meglio, nella continuità che intercorre tra questi e il ricordo e l'a-

spettativa. Il tempo come possibilità che rende possibile è l'esito cui giunge l'autore: nel flusso delle ritenzioni si costituisce l'oggetto insieme col soggetto, l'uno e l'altro come flusso di coscienza e come unità immanente dell'oggetto. Non è una scoperta, ma la sottolineatura di come sia doverosa un'ulteriore indagine sull'*Ur-Ich* come enigma di ogni cominciamento, enigma a suo modo anamorfico. I successivi passaggi dedicati a Jaspers indicano nella strada dell'immedesimazione il percorso verso l'individualità singolare, quelli dedicati a Zubiri rimarcano l'unità di sensibile e intelligibile nell'intelligenza senziente messa in rapporto stretto e articolato con la facoltà di immaginazione. Colonnello ricostruisce il ponte tra Kant e Zubiri utilizzando infine di nuovo Borges: in lui la conferma che tra il sentire e il comprendere la strada verso le aperture possibili passa attraverso la fecondità di una biforcazione presente.

Chiude il testo una lettera mai scritta di Dante Gabriel Rossetti alla sua amata Jane Morris, una lettera che scrive Colonnello immedesimandosi nella figura di Rossetti e nella sua capacità di trasfondere la sua visione poetica in immagine pittorica. L'esercizio serve a mostrare proprio questa sinestesica capacità dell'immagine di restituire la potenza della parola poetica spinta alla ricerca dell'età dell'oro evocata dall'associazione tra Prosperina e Matelda, tra la regina degli inferi che ritorna nel risveglio primaverile della natura e colei che riconduce alla felicità primigenia dell'uomo prima del peccato. Colonnello fa scrivere a Rossetti che nelle due figure femminili è racchiuso il mistero del passaggio a una bellezza superiore, la bellezza che salva nel rapimento e nell'estasi di un tempo che illumina l'avvenire.

Axel Honneth, *Riconoscimento. Storia di un'idea europea*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2018, pp. 184, ISBN:8807105438 [Giovanni Andreozzi]

Quali sono le condizioni genetiche della formazione dell'individuo e della consapevolezza della sua autonomia? Quando assumiamo delle norme e/o valori e agiamo nelle varie sfere della nostra forma di vita, quali condizioni incontriamo affinché possiamo definire caratterizzare quell'assunzione come "autonoma"? Anche se autonomia e soggettività sono intrinsecamente correlate, la riflessione su di esse non si è svolta in modo parallelo. Anzi, ci sono voluti diversi secoli dalla svolta moderna del soggetto prima che ci si ponesse il problema della sua genesi. Il soggetto, del resto, è stato inizialmente pensato come qualcosa di assolutamente primo, qualcosa di originario e di massimamente evidente. A partire dal Settecento e soprattutto

to con il cosiddetto “idealismo tedesco” questa concezione viene decostruita, attraverso l’esame delle condizioni che stanno alla base del sorgere del soggetto: esso è essenzialmente processo di soggettivazione. In tale processo assumono un certo rilievo le dinamiche sociali e relazionali in cui ogni individualità si trova e a partire dalle quali forma la propria identità.

Axel Honneth, filosofo di fama mondiale appartenente alla cosiddetta “terza generazione” della Scuola di Francoforte, ha inserito nel programma della teoria critica la ricerca specifica sul riconoscimento, tema da lui introdotto in modo esemplare nel celebre testo degli anni Novanta *Kampf um Anerkennung*. Nel suo recente libro, *Riconoscimento. Storia di un’idea europea* (traduzione di Flavio Cuniberto, Feltrinelli 2019, pp. 184) Honneth, raccoglie i contributi per una serie di lezioni tenute al Centre for Political Thought di Cambridge nei quali propone una ricostruzione geografica, storica e filosofica di quella che poi sarà chiamata la “teoria del riconoscimento”, dalla fine del Settecento a oggi. In tutte le tradizioni esaminate da Honneth – francese, inglese e tedesca – viene affermata la strutturale dipendenza dell’identità individuale dalla dimensione relazionale. Costitutivo per l’individuo è il suo esser-riconosciuto. Il soggetto è il risultato delle relazioni di riconoscimento invertebratesi in una determinata congerie storico-sociale. Segnando la seconda svolta della modernità, le tre tradizioni pongono al centro il carattere derivato della soggettività, il suo non essere qualcosa di preconstituito, ma anzi continuamente in formazione.

La prima tradizione è quella che risale a Rousseau, il «padre di ogni teoria moderna del riconoscimento». Per il filosofo francese l’esigenza di riconoscimento come *amour propre* è l’esigenza di apparire eccellenti agli occhi degli altri, un’esigenza spesso veicolata anche da atteggiamenti fittizi e contraffatti in vista esclusivamente dell’approvazione. Il rischio in cui incorre il paradigma “francese” è appunto quello di far dipendere il riconoscimento dall’esigenza di approvazione, non vagliando dunque in modo razionale i contenuti che devono essere riconosciuti o meno. Il paradigma francese del riconoscimento, in effetti, ha un’accezione completamente negativa, proprio di una società antagonista e conflittuale. All’*amour propre* Rousseau oppone l’*amour de soi*, l’istinto che ci permette di giudicare l’agire in base a criteri individuali, volti a ciò che è buono per l’individuo. Secondo Honneth questo riconoscimento negativo e la diffidenza nei suoi confronti caratterizza anche gli autori francesi più recenti come Sartre e Lacan. Seppur questa linea di continuità appare per più versi problematica, Honneth riconduce al paradigma francese un idealtipo “negativo” di riconoscimento attraverso il quale ogni soggetto «si abbandona totalmente al giudizio della società». La filosofia sociale francese – da La Rochefou-

cauld a Sartre, da Rousseau a Althusser – esprime una valutazione negativa della dipendenza dell’Io nei confronti delle relazioni sociali. Nel rapporto intersoggettivo il soggetto perde il proprio, autentico sé fino a degradarsi a semplice riflesso dei meccanismi di potere innescati dagli imperativi sociali. Secondo Rousseau, infatti, la cattiveria umana non è connaturata all’individuo, ma è solo un effetto della società. Quest’ultima opprime l’uomo e il naturale *amour de soi* che lo rende capace di immedesimarsi nell’altro e solidarizzare con esso. L’*amor propre*, invece, spinge l’uomo ad agire per l’approvazione e la stima dell’altro, che però vengono ricercati per distinguersi dall’altro, primeggiare. A tal fine è anche richiesta la dissimulazione delle varie qualità, che vengono impiegate solo in un’ottica conflittuale. Duecento anni dopo Sartre radicalizza le stesse considerazioni scettiche di Rousseau, allorché afferma che nell’incontro con l’altro si fa esperienza di qualcosa di perturbante poiché, nel momento in cui l’altro viene riconosciuto, viene pure cristallizzato e la sua vitalità viene ridotta a caratteristiche statiche. L’individuo diventa, dunque, una pura cosa.

Valutazione diametralmente opposta viene assunta dalla tradizione inglese. Hume, Smith e Mill concepiscono il riconoscimento come un valore positivo per ogni individuo di diventare un membro della comunità, attraverso l’addestramento del proprio comportamento morale. Il soggetto si sforza di conformare il proprio comportamento alle norme, in modo da divenire attore attivo nel processo sociale. Riconoscimento, scrive Honneth, «significa qui quell’atto sociale di approvazione etica che il soggetto deve poter immaginare per convincersi di appartenere a buon diritto alla propria comunità». La tradizione inglese della teoria del riconoscimento si connette all’idea liberista e proto-capitalista secondo cui la competizione spinge “naturalmente” l’individuo a migliorare se stesso. Per Hume e soprattutto per Smith i rapporti sociali, lungi dal degradare l’individuo, lo incentivano al miglioramento morale e civico: il desiderio dell’approvazione sociale è costantemente rivolto all’esterno e l’individuo si sente costantemente giudicato dal soggetto collettivo. È questo l’elemento più interessante nella tradizione inglese, puntualmente sottolineato da Honneth. Il fatto che il soggetto senta costantemente il giudizio da parte del soggetto collettivo significa che esso si sottopone a standard normativi universali, attraverso i quali orienta e bilancia i propri comportamenti. L’agire morale, questo è secondo Honneth il passo fondamentale della tradizione inglese, è il risultato del processo di socializzazione attraverso cui l’individuo interiorizza le regole universali. Per Smith, ad esempio, il bisogno di approvazione e riconoscimento sociale nasce al desiderio di unirci all’altro, veicolato dalla naturale *sympathy*.

Ma è solo con l'area tedesca che il riconoscimento viene inteso come atto reciproco tra due soggetti. Con Kant lo spettatore imparziale di Smith, ricettacolo dei punti di vista altrui, diventa la ragione che detta la legge morale e induce al "rispetto". Nella tradizione tedesca il riconoscimento diventa «un atto diadico di autolimitazione morale, un atto che coinvolge almeno due soggetti, impegnati a riconoscere l'un l'altro la rispettiva autonomia razionale e la rispettiva appartenenza a una comunità di esseri razionali». Nell'idealismo tedesco, secondo Honneth, si giunge a una teorizzazione più profonda e compatta della dinamica individuo-riconoscimento-società. È con Fichte che il riconoscimento viene tematizzato in modo esplicito. Se per Kant l'autodeterminazione morale sorge nel momento in cui la coscienza si oppone alle inclinazioni sensibili, per Fichte questo può avvenire solo nel rapporto comunicativo tra i soggetti. Hegel poi riprende la concezione della *Aufforderung*, caratterizzando il riconoscimento reciproco come condizione costitutiva di una soggettività libera, delineando il rapporto intersoggettivo nelle forme della vita concreta e storica. Il vero *novum* della tradizione tedesca è il fatto che – riprendendo la terminologia hegeliana – accanto al bisogno "passivo" dell'esser-riconosciuto viene affermata la necessità "attiva" del riconoscere. I due movimenti sono dialetticamente intrecciati: solo la reciprocità tra *Anerkanntsein* e *Anerkennung* può garantire la riuscita del rapporto di riconoscimento.

Il limite della ricostruzione honnethiana è il non aver dedicato abbastanza attenzione a quelle dinamiche di potere in cui il riconoscimento diventa veicolo di omologazione delle differenze e neutralizzazione dell'alterità. Il pregio, invece, risiede nel fatto che Honneth ha provato – ciò non vuol dire che sia riuscito del tutto – a comporre un quadro unitario di queste tradizioni, assumendo come punto di arrivo le tesi sviluppate da Fichte e da Hegel. Il motivo di questa scelta, come si può già intendere, è il fatto che tanto per Fichte quanto per Hegel, il riconoscimento è sì un fenomeno sociale, ma è altrettanto la base della formazione della soggettività umana. Fichte e Hegel comprendono che solo attraverso il riconoscimento tra i soggetti di essere giudici e promotori di norme condivise può esserci una convivenza autentica e liberante.

In questa dinamica propriamente "normativa" la relazione richiede il rispetto dell'altro – nella duplice valenza di genitivo soggettivo e oggettivo – e, contemporaneamente, il superamento dell'atteggiamento egoistico (ancora presente nella tradizione inglese). La socializzazione è dunque la fonte della consapevolezza della propria autonomia. I soggetti si riconoscono nella loro libertà e, al contempo, limitazione reciproca. Il filosofo sociale, però, non può fermarsi a questo risultato: egli deve "completare"

la teoria del riconoscimento con la critica al riconoscimento “patologico”, in un movimento di *Aufhebung* in cui ritornano le teorizzazioni e le problematiche evidenziate dalla tradizione francese e da quella inglese.

Forse l'aspetto più interessante del testo di Honneth è la sua costante contestualizzazione storica, tesa a far emergere il rapporto dinamico – non unidirezionale – tra dinamica storico-sociale ed elaborazione teoretica-filosofica: in Francia la tradizione statalista e la lotta per gli “onori” fin dai tempi dell'*Ancien Régime*; in Inghilterra la necessità di porre dei limiti, anche morali, alla mentalità dell'*homo oeconomicus* della prima rivoluzione industriale: in Germania l'aspirazione della borghesia rispetto a un'emancipazione non solo culturale, ma anche politica. Proprio in questo confronto con le condizioni “materiali” della vita umana risiede l'importanza del testo di Honneth il quale ci conduce, attraverso una ricca disamina storico-filosofica, fino ai giorni nostri, esortando una riflessione sul senso della democrazia e del vivere in comune a partire dai diversi paradigmi del riconoscimento, con la consapevolezza che essi sono sempre soggetti a modifiche e distorsioni, finendo talvolta con l'opprimere l'individuo che in principio intendeva salvaguardare.

Volker Schmitz, *Axel Honneth and the Critical Theory of Recognition*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham, Switzerland 2019, ISBN: 978-3-319-91979-9, pp. 285 [Raffaele Carbone].

I saggi raccolti nel volume coordinato da Volker Schmitz esaminano in primo luogo la curvatura che ha marcato la teoria honnethiana del riconoscimento: da teoria che spiega e legittima la lotta per la dignità e il rispetto all'interno delle tensioni tra diversi gruppi politico-sociali a teoria dal carattere più conservatore sulla natura razionale delle forme sociali moderne. In secondo luogo, essi si interrogano sulla effettiva filiazione del paradigma del riconoscimento con lo “spirito” originario della teoria critica della società in un'epoca – la nostra – segnata dalle istanze ostili del neoliberalismo e dell'austerità, dalla crescita della disuguaglianza sociale e dal declino della consapevolezza morale degli individui nei confronti dell'immigrazione. Come afferma segnatamente Lauren Langman nel quarto capitolo del volume, «one of the great ironies of our times» si rivela nel fatto che l'affermazione di Axel Honneth come voce dominante della Scuola di Francoforte si sia verificata in una fase storica tormentata da molteplici crisi e problemi economici (p. 93). Gli articoli che compongono il volume – lo stesso Schmitz lo mette in evidenza nell'intro-

duzione (p. 6) – esplorano dunque l’opera di Honneth e la sua capacità di rispondere alle esigenze della teoria critica a partire da background differenti; inoltre, impiegano svariate metodologie, ricorrendo finanche a generi di scrittura diversi (dall’analisi accademica tradizionale all’appello programmatico e politico).

L’articolo di J. C. Berendzen esemplifica in maniera sintomatica la prima grande istanza del volume, che ricostruisce e interroga alcuni momenti del percorso di Honneth. Berendzen si sofferma in particolare su alcuni testi degli anni 2000, nei quali, esplorando gli scritti hegeliani post-jenesi, Honneth giunge a sostenere la tesi che Hegel ha cercato per tutta la sua vita di interpretare lo spirito oggettivo, la realtà sociale, come un insieme di relazioni stratificate di riconoscimento. Berendzen esamina in primo luogo la concezione del riconoscimento elementare che, svuotato di norme morali positive, può essere pensato come “proto-morale” in un modo che lo collega strettamente alle forme più sviluppate di riconoscimento sociale. In secondo luogo, attraverso il confronto con il capitolo IV della *Fenomenologia dello spirito*, egli mette in luce i nessi che Honneth traccia tra i concetti di vita, desiderio e riconoscimento: il desiderio, in particolare, può portare il soggetto a partecipare pienamente alla vita solo attraverso un confronto con un altro soggetto, in un movimento che gli impone una autolimitazione; in tal modo il desiderio conduce a un livello corporeo e pre-cognitivo di riconoscimento che è la condizione di possibilità per lo sviluppo dell’autocoscienza, e quindi anche per le ulteriori forme di riconoscimento attraverso le quali essa si dispiega. Berendzen rivendica, dunque, l’esigenza di combinare l’analisi honnethiana dell’autocoscienza nella *Fenomenologia dello spirito* e quelle condotte in *Reificazione* (il libro nato da una serie di conferenze tenute all’Università di Berkeley) per restituire la visione d’insieme a cui il filosofo di Essen mira, vale a dire una concezione concettualmente ed empiricamente difendibile del riconoscimento nel suo radicamento antropologico.

Parimenti indicativo degli intenti di questo volume collettivo – saggiare la portata del progetto honnethiano, indagato nel suo sviluppo e nei suoi mutamenti, rispetto alle esigenze originarie della teoria critica e alle istanze dell’attualità – è il saggio di Konstantinos Kavoulakos, che analizza alcune delle questioni affrontate proprio nel libro sulla reificazione: *Verdinglichung: Eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie* (2005), punto di approdo di un progetto di reinterpretazione della teoria di Lukács nel quadro del paradigma del riconoscimento avviato fin dagli inizi degli anni ’90. Come è noto, in questo libro Honneth intende individuare un fondamento antropologico – paradossalmente debole e forte a un tempo – della teoria critica

a partire da una reinterpretazione della categoria lukácsiana di reificazione, secondo la quale la reificazione presuppone, nella relazione degli individui con il mondo, la perdita della componente di un riconoscimento anteriore su cui ogni conoscere si fonda. Kavoulakos nota che la rielaborazione honnethiana si caratterizza, forse senza grande sorpresa, per una lacuna: l'oblio della concezione lukácsiana della storia. Honneth, in effetti, convinto della natura metafisica di tutte le letture teleologiche della storia, sembra escludere consapevolmente un fondamento storico-filosofico dei criteri etici della critica. È per questo che, secondo Honneth, rimane aperta soltanto la strada di un'antropologia filosofica "debole" e "formale", tuttavia sufficientemente forte da trascendere il relativismo storico. Kavoulakos tratteggia dunque una breve storia della critica del celebre testo lukácsiano del 1923 all'interno della storia della teoria critica, focalizzando in particolare le osservazioni adorniane sul carattere idealistico della filosofia della storia di Lukács e la tesi habermassiana secondo la quale la critica di Lukács alla reificazione si basa su una filosofia metafisica della storia. In *Reificazione*, poi, la critica tradizionale al presunto "idealismo" di Lukács (e alla possibilità di un'azione politica autoritaria incorporata nella teoria metafisica del proletariato come soggetto-oggetto della storia) si arricchisce con una riflessione che problematizza la sua metodologia deterministica nel campo delle scienze sociali: Honneth attribuisce a Lukács l'idea che l'espansione dello scambio di merci sia la causa sociale del fenomeno della reificazione. Si configura qui un "riduzionismo" che conduce a una «"totalization" of the instrumental rationality of capitalism» (p. 47). Agli occhi dello studioso di Lukács – cfr. il suo ultimo libro: *Georg Lukács's Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism* (London, Bloomsbury, 2018) – si tratta di una critica infondata in quanto Lukács, in *Storia e coscienza di classe*, ha preso chiaramente le distanze dall'economicismo, sostenendo che la differenza decisiva tra il marxismo e il pensiero borghese non consiste nel primato dei fattori economici ma nel punto di vista della totalità. Per evitare la totalizzazione della reificazione, che sembra adombrata nella concezione lukácsiana, secondo la quale essa consisterebbe in un'abitudine di mera contemplazione e osservazione, in cui l'ambiente naturale, il contesto sociale e i tratti individuali vengono percepiti come cose, Honneth propone di pensare la reificazione come dimenticanza del riconoscimento, in base alla quale nei nostri atti cognitivi perdiamo di vista il fatto che il conoscere deve la sua esistenza a un atto di riconoscimento antecedente. Segnalando che, dopo la pubblicazione in inglese del libro sulla reificazione, Honneth non è più tornato sulla questione, Kavoulakos rileva nell'opera del filosofo di Essen una evidente oscillazione tra un approccio più antropologico e



uno più storico, uno più sostanziale e una più formalista, una prospettiva più trascendente e una più immanente: questo andirivieni è indicativo della necessità di riconsiderare il problema di una mediazione tra i due poli teorici antitetici.

L'articolo di David A. Borman, *Bourgeois Illusions: Honneth on the Ruling Ideas of Capitalist Societies*, propone invece un'attenta analisi dello slittamento delle posizioni di Honneth – a dispetto della continuità tra i suoi primi testi e quelli più recenti che lo stesso Honneth e alcuni studiosi a lui vicini rivendicano – rispetto all'attuale configurazione economica e politica delle società occidentali. Borman afferma, infatti, che la prospettiva di Honneth sull'incorporazione ideologica si è sostanzialmente modificata nel corso degli sviluppi della sua riflessione, e senza guadagnare una maggiore plausibilità. Tali cambiamenti, sempre più evidenti nei testi dell'ultimo periodo, implicano, secondo Borman, un'accettazione piuttosto acritica da parte di Honneth del repertorio concettuale ideologico (le "idee dominanti") della società borghese; d'altro canto, i più recenti lavori honnethiani procedono in una direzione opposta rispetto ai suoi primi e più interessanti articoli, che utilizzavano un gran numero di preziose fonti storiche e sociologiche. Se ad essi il filosofo di Essen ha continuato ad attingere a sostegno della sua attuale posizione, le sue tesi più recenti sembrano in realtà abbastanza incongruenti rispetto alla prima fase della sua riflessione. Borman insiste in particolare sulla svolta honnethiana – in *Das Recht der Freiheit* (Suhrkamp, 2011) – verso un modello di «normative reconstruction» dell'economia (pp. 98, 113, 114), rivelativa di un monismo concettuale che prende le norme borghesi «at face value» (p. 98) e che non contiene alcuna traccia della precedente tensione volta a decriptare la "moralità nascosta" prodotta dalla dominazione. Se nell'articolo *Moralbewusstsein und soziale Klassenherrschaft* (pubblicato in *Leviathan* nel 1981 e tradotto in inglese l'anno successivo) Honneth affermava che il sistema di norme accettato per ragioni di carattere pragmatico è oggetto di un persistente scetticismo, alimentato da sentimenti di ingiustizia effettivamente controllati, in *Das Recht der Freiheit* egli deduce dalla durevole esistenza del mercato capitalistico e/o dalla costante partecipazione dei lavoratori e dei consumatori a quel mercato, che «it really must, as an institution – and apart from the depressing details of its empirical performance – embody consensual norms» (p. 115). La posizione di Borman nei confronti dell'opera di Honneth – che nel contesto del presente volume va confrontata con la lettura proposta da Mariana Teixeira, secondo la quale in *Das Recht der Freiheit* si percepisce una rinnovata apertura teorica a una critica della ragione strumentale nella forma di una critica della libertà negativa (p. 174) – trova risonanza in altre

letture contemporanee, ad esempio quella di Stathis Kouvélakis. Nel suo ultimo libro (*La critique défaite. Émergence et domestication de la théorie critique*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2019, p. 518) il pensatore e militante che ha insegnato teoria politica al King's College a Londra rileva che la teoria critica attuale (in particolare con Honneth) ha interiorizzato l'ordine sociale esistente come orizzonte ultimo del pensabile; la critica è così diventata una terapia del sociale che si limita a riparare un mondo che non è più considerato capace di trasformazione.

Prossima alla lettura di Borman, ma meno radicale, è quella che Volker Schmitz delinea nel suo saggio *Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Radical Reformism*: secondo Schmitz, se da un lato è possibile considerare l'opera di Honneth in continuità con il riformismo radicale, dall'altro essa non permette di compiere un effettivo progresso in questa direzione poiché Honneth legittima le acquisizioni istituzionalizzate delle moderne società di mercato. In effetti, agli occhi di Schmitz, il riformismo radicale può costituire una proposta praticabile solo se è chiaramente organizzato e indirizzato verso un risultato concreto che renda pienamente conto delle patologie della società capitalista contemporanea, ma questo richiede un impegno che non può essere facilmente conciliato con gli esigenti requisiti procedurali della teoria francofortese contemporanea e con la fiducia honnethiana nell'evoluzione sociale e nel «quasi-democratic character» di tutte le istituzioni moderne (p. 168).

La legittimazione del modello neoliberista sembra in realtà una conseguenza non originariamente contemplata o adeguatamente esaminata da Honneth quando ha elaborato la sua teoria del riconoscimento. Gregory R. Smulewicz-Zucker mette l'accento sull'inadeguatezza della diagnosi honnethiana sui mali della vita economica moderna: i rapporti di potere da cui dipende la sfera economica moderna alterano, infatti, la capacità degli individui di impegnarsi nel tipo di pratiche democratiche che Honneth immagina. Particolarmente problematico, a questo proposito, è il modo in cui Honneth descrive le varie trasformazioni economiche degli ultimi quarant'anni, in genere raggruppate dagli studiosi sotto il termine ombrello neoliberalismo e da lui considerate come un «misdevelopment» (p. 126) delle norme che egli crede siano incorporate nell'ideale della società di mercato. Harry F. Dahms rileva invece che il paradigma del riconoscimento valuta le conquiste sociali, politiche e culturali delle società novecentesca post-bellica come sufficientemente concrete e affidabili tanto da configurare la ricerca della giustizia sociale, l'uguaglianza di trattamento e l'accettazione da parte degli altri come le sfide più importanti che le società attuali stanno affrontando. Tuttavia, quando ha concepito il paradigma del riconoscimen-

to, Honneth sembra aver sottovalutato o trascurato la prossimità della sua teoria, nel contesto del neoliberismo emergente, alla logica del capitale, la sua complicità con la logica che orienta la costituzione delle società moderne. L'attenzione che Honneth consacra all'elemento normativo – la centralità che nella sua opera ha l'infrastruttura normativa dei conflitti sociali (cfr. l'articolo di Mariana Teixeira, p. 174) – gli ha impedito di vedere che le società moderne costringono gli individui a interiorizzare norme e valori che sono necessari per il loro funzionamento e la loro stabilità, proprio quando esse si stanno sviluppando in direzioni che non rendono più possibile per tutti una “vita buona” e minano la capacità degli individui di costruire storie di vita significative in un contesto costellato da contraddizioni e dissonanze cognitive, da forme di inganno e mendacità socialmente tollerate e politicamente incoraggiate (cfr. pp. 233-234). D'altro canto, secondo Michael J. Thompson, il paradigma del riconoscimento nel suo complesso non è riuscito a far rivivere lo spirito critico della prima Scuola di Francoforte: pur se la rivendicazione del riconoscimento è espressione delle istanze progressiste delle società moderne (rispetto a quelle premoderne), il suo radicamento nelle strutture delle relazioni sociali organizzate e modellate dalla società e dagli imperativi amministrativo-capitalistici non può servire da fondamento per lo sviluppo di una razionalità critica. Una strategia ermeneutica diversa è invece adottata da James E. Block nel saggio che chiude il volume. Block mette a confronto i concetti di “riconoscimento” e “storia”: con il sorgere dell'interiorità moderna, entrambi sono capaci di dischiudere dimensioni di grande profondità e di liberare potenzialità che sono state soffocate e trascurate; d'altro canto, nessuno dei due è intrinsecamente progressista o conservatore. Un riconoscimento radicale e una storicizzazione radicale possono rivelare e rispecchiare i bisogni e i desideri più profondi dei soggetti storici, le potenzialità sottostanti, incorporate nei loro sogni di vita post-industriale, dando loro voce e movimento e articolandoli in una tensione che risemanticizza il passato e si proietta verso il futuro: una diversa variante di riconoscimento può dunque soddisfare in modo più adeguato l'intento emancipatore della teoria critica.



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