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Reflections on Recognition: A Matter of Self-realization or a Matter of Justice ?

Eimear Wynne

Recognition involves both our relationship with ourselves and our relationship to others. It evokes both the notion of respect and a basic quest for understanding which should be at the forefront of our relations with others. In recognizing “the other” we are acknowledging the other and yet not claiming absolute knowledge of the other. As Richard Rorty argues, in recognizing others, we see human beings as generators of new descriptions, not as beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately.¹ From another perspective, Charles Taylor argues that recognition, in certain respects, can be said to involve *re*-cognition, a ‘knowing again’, a sort of re-acquaintance among ‘selves’. He implies this point when he asserts that recognition draws upon the concept of recollection; it involves remembering in the sense of

¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 378.

calling again to mind the ‘being’ understood to be present in all human beings.² Thus, in recognizing the other, we are calling to mind the ‘being-ness’ of the other, which we share with the other. This means that, recognition rests on the presumption of shared community in which identity is formed, projected, and understood. As a result, recognizing difference is at the same time recognizing sameness and commonness of our being in the world.

Given the preceding account, we might ask: is recognition a matter of self-realization or a matter of justice or both? In trying to answer this question, I will begin with an analysis of Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic, which I believe clearly indicates that recognition must be viewed first and foremost as a matter of self-realization. I will then turn to Axel Honneth’s account of what he refers to as the three stages of recognition, namely self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. I will focus on what Honneth deems essential for people to have a healthy relationship with themselves and others. Finally, I shall examine Nancy Fraser’s argument that recognition should be seen as a matter of justice rather than as a matter of self-realization. I shall assess the possibility of ‘de-coupling’ recognition from its psychological roots or inter-personal nature, which Fraser advocates in order to strengthen its normative force.

Recognition takes place between subjects within particular parameters: cultural, intellectual, geographical, even ethical. Taylor, for instance, claims that some of the behavior exhibited by the Aztec priests and rulers, which include things like ripping people’s hearts out, we would consider psychopathic behavior. He argues, that in order to avoid dismissing the whole society as pathological we may have to enlarge and alter our parameters of recognition so that understanding can take place. In short, this means we must articulate, and go beyond, what were formerly limits to our conception of intelligibility or recognizability, thereby constructing a new context for seeing the Aztecs.³ Here, Taylor is drawing attention to the role our context or culture plays in providing a medium through which we apprehend ourselves and others. No understanding or recognition can take place without this medium, but it is a fluid medium that is constantly changing as we change. The context within which recognition takes place becomes vital in debates over group-rights and multiculturalism.

² Charles Taylor, “The Need for Recognition”, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 52.

³ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 149.

The Roots of the Concept of Recognition

Let us turn to the concept of recognition as outlined in Hegel's Master/Slave model. The concept of recognition delineated in this model suggests that it is through recognizing and being recognized by the other that we become aware of our own self. For Hegel, one becomes a subject by viewing oneself as an addressee or interlocutor of other subjects. The Master/Slave model suggests that self-consciousness depends on the other; indeed it requires recognition from the other. Further, there is not only the confirmation of one's own self here, but also, and perhaps more importantly, confirmation of the self of the other. Moreover, recognition is seen as a requirement for understanding. The aim of recognition is not to transcend or negate one's own point of view as a situated and contextualized being. Rather, recognition takes place within these limits. Through understanding and recognizing the other our self-understanding is changed and our horizons are broadened and expanded.

Hegel's Master/Slave model enables us to understand how we, as autonomous individuals, can be reconciled to the community of which we are a part. The first step towards the recognition of difference is self-consciousness, as we move from subjectivity to inter-subjectivity. One of the key aspects of Hegel's theory of recognition is the transition from individual consciousness to inter-subjective-consciousness. For Hegel, although 'self-consciousness' exists in and for itself, it's more important characteristic is that it exists only in being acknowledged.⁴ In other words, subjectivity exists only through inter-subjectivity; we must find our subjectivity in the external "objective spirit" of culture. As Alexandre Kojève points out, for the idea of oneself to be a truth, it must exist not only for oneself but also for beings other than oneself.⁵ Thus, our identity is dependent on the recognition we receive from others. For Hegel, "real and true man" is the result of his interaction with others; his 'I' and the idea he has of himself are "mediated" by recognition obtained as a result of his action or interaction with others. Hegel emphasizes the inter-subjective duality of this action. "Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both"[subjects].⁶ Thus, two subjects recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage", *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 111.

⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, (New York: Basic Books, 1969), p. 11.

⁶ Hegel, op. cit., p. 112.

Hegel posits two opposed concrete forms of consciousness: one is autonomous consciousness, for which the essential reality is being for itself; the other is dependent consciousness, for which the essential reality is animal life, that is, given being for another entity. The former is the master and the latter the slave. The slave becomes a slave by accepting the life granted to him by another. The master, on the other hand, is consciousness existing for itself. His relation to himself is *mediated* by the slave, who recognizes the master as master. Hence, for Hegel, to be fully human is to be recognized or mediated. Yet, vital to the Hegelian notion of recognition is reciprocity. Self-consciousness does not lose itself in the other or to the other. If this were so, then one would no longer see the other as a self at all, but rather, merely see oneself in the other. As Hans-Georg Gadamer explains, although self-consciousness must cancel “the other being standing on its own” in order to be certain of itself, it must also hold itself back out of respect for the other. It is essential for self-consciousness that the other continues to exist. Only if the other is not simply the other of the first self-consciousness, not simply his other, but rather free, can it provide confirmation of the first’s self-consciousness.⁷

The relationship between the master and slave is, however, not one of proper recognition. Although the master is recognized as a master by the slave, this recognition is one-sided, as he does not recognize the slave’s human reality and dignity. In order to be fully recognized one must be recognized by someone whom one recognizes in turn. As a result, the master does not achieve true recognition. The slave, on the other hand, although subordinated to the master, recognizes the reality of human freedom; not finding it in himself, he finds it in the other, the master. Whereas the master is fixed in his mastery, the slave must transcend his condition of slavery.⁸ In essence the slave continues to become, which he achieves through work.⁹ What is most significant is that the slave is dependent on the existence of the master, who provides the catalyst for his transformation.

Despite its profundity, there are problems with this Hegelian model. For example, it seems to predetermine that some of us play the role of master, never achieving true recognition for ourselves, in order for the slave to transcend his condition. Even the roles of master and slave seem rather outdated for societal relations today. However, this model illustrates the inter-personal nature of recognition and the

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hegel’s Dialectic of Self-Consciousness”, *Hegel’s Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 64.

⁸ Hegel, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118. Also see Kojève, *op. cit.* pp. 21-22.

inter-subjective constitution of identity. It demonstrates the role the other plays, not merely in mirroring our selves to our selves, but more importantly in transforming who we are. Finally, the unequal relationship of the master to the slave emphasizes the need for universal recognition, the fact that in order to be genuinely recognized I must recognize the other as my equal.

II. Recognition and Psychology

In his book, *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth continues on a sort of neo-Hegelian path, following Hegel's earlier Jena writings. He concurs that one's relationship to oneself is not solitary but rather an intersubjective process, that one's attitude towards oneself emerges in one's encounter with an other's attitude towards oneself. Agreeing that the establishment of relations of mutual recognition is a precondition for self-realization, he further argues that our struggle for recognition takes place within relations of love, law and 'the ethical life' (Sittlichkeit), which he maintains constitute relations of recognition through which individuals reciprocally confirm each other as autonomous and individual persons.¹⁰ Honneth propounds three vital components of identity formation: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Self-confidence derives from relations of love and friendship. Self-respect is maintained and fostered by legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for people. Lastly, self-esteem comes from community relations and acknowledgment. These, he argues, are only attained through inter-subjective recognition, whereby we are recognized by others whom we recognize. Thus, we are dependent on the establishment of relations of mutual recognition for self-realization.

For Honneth, our relationship to ourselves is not a solitary thing but an inter-subjective process where one's view of oneself becomes manifest with an other's view of oneself. Self-confidence, the most fundamental form of recognition for Honneth, takes place in relations between children and their parents, friendships, and adult relationships of love, as they are at the heart of the relationship to the self. Honneth draws on George Herbert Mead's psychological theory to establish that the relationships children have with their parents and others have a profound effect on their development. The role a parent plays in providing the needs of the infant and yet allowing for the infant to develop on its own, is a finely balanced one,

¹⁰ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 69.

worked out inter-subjectively between the parent and the child and leads to 'basic trust'.¹¹ This demonstrates how the self is transformed in the process of social development, as individuals learn to conceive of themselves from the perspective of what he calls 'the generalized other'. Growing children recognize their interaction with others by internalizing their normative attitudes. They begin to know themselves to be members of their social context of cooperation, accordingly they become members of the community.¹²

The second aspect of recognition Honneth outlines is self-respect, the respect due all persons on the basis of being human. Legal rights provide the medium through which this form of self-respect is best captured. There is a strong Kantian element here with the definition of personhood incorporating the capacity of persons to outline the moral and political laws to which they are subject, and the importance of respecting and recognizing this capacity or right. I will return to this aspect of recognition in my discussion of Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition as a matter of justice.

The third stage of recognition Honneth outlines is self-esteem, which requires the recognition of what sets us apart from others, recognition of our differences and uniqueness. As such, it is the more problematic of the three. Self-esteem and one's own identity are tied to one another. Honneth expounds Mead's theory of individuation, which looks at the division of labor and how individuals' functions afford them the space in which to define themselves according to how they contribute to society. This is reminiscent of the role work plays in the slave's transformation in the Hegelian model. But again Honneth's model is not without its difficulties, as social-esteem is based on what counts as a contribution to society. Thus, the work of homemakers, for example, may go unrecognized. As a result, Honneth proposes we situate esteem in the horizon of values of a particular culture, rather than in the division of labor. In fact Honneth uses the term 'solidarity' for the cultural climate where self-esteem is derived. By this Honneth means that some shared concern or value is present for esteem to be achieved and generated inter-subjectively. So, for Honneth, in order that individuals be given the opportunity for full self-realization, common values must be shared. Consequently, his account has a strong communitarian strain. His notion of esteem is based on a contribution to one's community. But how large is this community? If esteem comes only from one's peers it would seem that it must come first and foremost from those of the

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 76- 77.

¹² Ibid., p. 78.

group to which an individual belongs. In a multi-cultural or multi-ethnic society this becomes very complicated and may result in the fragmentation of the society into sub-communities or sub-groups, instead of according the recognition that engenders self-confidence and self-respect.

Recognition as a Matter of Justice

Nancy Fraser shifts her theory of recognition from the realm of self-realization to the sphere of justice. In some sense Fraser's contribution to this debate can be seen as a return to a more universal theory of recognition, transferring it from the more subjective realm of self-realization. She privileges the conception of recognition as a matter of justice and sets forth a pragmatic strategy for avoiding mis-recognition by combining it with the issue of redistribution.

Fraser must bring recognition into the realm of justice in order to put it on the same plane as her theory of redistribution, which comes in tandem with recognition issues, as she demonstrates with the cases of race and gender. But there are certain problems involved in removing recognition from its psychological or inter-personal birthplace. The notion of identity formation is not one that can be rationalized easily for the legal sphere. It is not fixed, rather, it is constantly evolving. The notion of reciprocity, which is tied to the Hegelian notion of recognition, requires a shared value structure between individuals in order for them to be able to recognize each other. The liberal notion of "subjective freedom" will not be able to account for our interaction with others, which we rely on for our identity formation and recognition. Instead, it emphasizes what separates and differentiates us from one another.

Fraser proposes the norm of 'participatory parity' to replace what she sees as the teleological norms of self-realization and the good. She maintains that for purposes of political theory, these can be replaced with justice, which can justify claims for recognition as normatively binding on all who agree to abide by fair terms of interaction under conditions of value pluralism.¹³ However, this requires the prior establishment of recognition, i.e., that we all recognize and accept the rule of law. Consider for example the case of the Kurds in Turkey or the Palestinians in Israel. The rule of law is perceived by these minority groups to be in favor of the majority group, to their disadvantage. In such a situation these people are unlikely to relinquish their need for recognition of what is required for their self-realization or their

¹³ Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation", (Unpublished manuscript, 1997), pp. 19-20.

notion of the good in favor of justice. Recognition is appealed to on these bases precisely because various groups feel that either justice is not enough, or too abstract and therefore unable to connect to their everyday lives.

Of course there are advantages to treating recognition as a matter of justice, but mis-recognition and the humiliation it engenders is often not 'felt' in justice terms. It is rather 'felt' as a deep psychological harm. Fraser argues that to be mis-recognized (as a matter of justice) is to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a consequence of 'institutionalized' patterns of interpretation and evaluation. So she is in effect tackling 'institutionalized' mis-recognition by means of an 'institutionalized' remedy: the institution of justice.

Fraser asserts that by treating recognition as a matter of justice we keep mis-recognition as an externally manifest and publicly verifiable affair, which prevents some people from participating as full members of society. Therefore, she points out that overcoming mis-recognition involves changing institutionalized interpretations and norms which hinder what she terms 'participatory parity'.¹⁴ One of the benefits Fraser cites in leaving aside the psychological or inter-personal aspect of mis-recognition is that it avoids laying the blame upon the victim, which, she argues, can result when we identify mis-recognition with internal distortions of the self-consciousness of the 'oppressed'. However, as I have outlined above, the issue of mis-recognition is intimately connected to the psychological playing out of identity formation and association. The idea that it is in danger of ending up blaming the victim is a bit of a red herring as mis-recognition involves two distinct entities interacting, and mis-recognition occurs when this interaction fails to connect in the appropriate way. This point also bears upon Fraser's other concern, whereby mis-recognition is equated with prejudice in the minds of the oppressors, which, she fears may lead to a 'policing' of their beliefs. This she also finds unacceptable. Again, there is a problem in reducing recognition to justice as opposed to just coupling it with justice or, as seems more appropriate, with redistribution theory.

For Fraser, the justice account of recognition avoids the view that everyone has an equal right to social esteem which, she argues, Honneth's theory requires for undistorted identity formation. She proposes instead the requirement that everyone has an equal right to pursue social esteem under fair conditions of equal opportu-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

nity. This means that institutionalized patterns of interpretation which ‘downgrade’ such things as femininity or non-whiteness must be replaced.¹⁵

Fraser’s argument for ‘participatory parity’ is a persuasive one. This is a basic right which requires the establishment of social arrangements to ensure that all adults can interact with one another as peers. But Fraser’s argument runs into problems on the issue of recognition of distinctiveness, where she maintains that the recognition needs of subordinate groups differ from those of dominant groups.¹⁶ I feel that some of the problems encountered here derive from her use of the term ‘distinctiveness’ whereby a minority group wishes to have their ‘distinctiveness’ recognized. Fraser claims that what is at stake is fundamentally an issue of power, and that once the obstacles perceived to exist are removed and the minority group can participate on a par with others, their claims for the recognition of their ‘distinctiveness’ will melt away. Perhaps if we substitute the word ‘characteristic’ for ‘distinctiveness’ we can better see that this facet of identity formation is unlikely to just melt away with participatory parity. Our characteristics are not just summoned up in an attempt to draw minority people together to fight for democratic rights. Rather, our characteristics represent who we are to ourselves as well as who we present ourselves to be to others. It is this vital element that Fraser has cast aside in her effort to be pragmatic. It explains why the reduction of recognition as simply a matter of justice or participatory parity will not suffice.

The theory of recognition has its base in connections we make with ourselves and others. This moment of ‘connection’ is missing in Fraser’s theory since it involves our psychological or inter-personal bond with the social world of others and our bond with ourselves. Failure to make this connection is ultimately a failure to recognize. Consequently, we fail to participate as humans, connecting socially with others. True recognition is a rare and valuable thing. It takes a lifetime to recognize who we are because we are continually changing. The effort to truly recognize an other becomes even more difficult, as it requires action on both sides: recognition of both selves and both others. Yet for all its difficulty, it is necessary if understanding is to take place and connections are to be formed.

The appeal to justice is a way to propose a theory of obligation which is not grounded in the more familiar ethical notion of duty. The fear is that, unless rights to certain goods and services can be established, the poor and under-privileged are left to the mercy of the inconsistent ‘goodwill’ of others. Certainly we need institu-

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28.

tions which allocate responsibilities and create positive rights that will prevent or limit systematic injury of the vulnerable. But, as Onora O'Neill argues, the fact that certain social virtues alone cannot effectively protect the vulnerable from injury, does not show that they are unrequired and that justice is enough.¹⁷

IV. Conclusion

Principles of justice alone are not enough to supply what is ethically required for recognition to take place. O'Neill points out that when we take account of the repeated patterns of vulnerability (or mis-recognition) that institutions can mitigate, and of the varied and specific ways in which particular agents and subjects are and become vulnerable to others, it seems unlikely that justice can be enough. Therefore, while principles of justice take due account of the plurality of lives, they take minimal and formal account of their connectedness. Connection is always of a specific sort, involving specific others, and specific power relations and expectations.¹⁸ As a result, recognition requires the inter-personal dimension which is stressed by Hegel, Gadamer and Honneth. Recognition is undoubtedly a matter of justice also, but it cannot be reduced to that alone, since it operates within a more personal psychological domain, and requires the unique bonding of two subjects, which will necessarily be different every time.

Recognition must be seen in many respects as a social virtue, which must be cultivated and maintained in order for us to develop relations not only with ourselves but, more importantly, with others. The formation of our identity is dependent on this. A central context for attitudes and action that express certain social virtues is often provided in the daily, ordered and constraining lives of family and household, school and work, friendship and locality. As Honneth has pointed out, at their best they provide organizing structures for sustained love, care and solidarity. Duties of justice arise where contractual or other institutional structures establish enforceable rights and obligations between specified parties. However, when occasions and recipients of action are not fully defined, principles have to be embedded in more flexible ways. This is the basic reason why certain social virtues are better embodied in the characters of agents as ethical attitudes and characteristics rather than in structures that define precise claims between agents and recipients.

¹⁷ Onora O'Neill, "Why Justice is not enough" in *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive account of practical reasoning*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 190.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 193.

In conclusion, then, the appeal for recognition fundamentally relates to the interpersonal connections we make with ourselves and others, where recognition is necessarily contextualized and grounded in the cultural roots of the subjects. Recognition from an institution, such as the legal system for example, is a further extension of this relationship, but it remains dependent on it and cannot be separated from it.

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