

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

## Introduction

Bert van den Brink and David Owen

The topic of recognition now occupies a central place in contemporary debates in social and political theory. Rooted in Hegel's early Jena Writings and the famous discussion of the Master/Slave dialectic in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and developed in a variety of ways by George Herbert Mead, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser, recognition has been given renewed expression in the ambitious third-generation program for Critical Theory developed by Axel Honneth over the past twenty years, most prominently in his classic text *The Struggle for Recognition*.<sup>1</sup>

Honneth's guiding thought has two aspects. First, modern ethical agency requires the formation of practical relations to self that are constituted in and through relations of recognition across three axes of self-formation: love, respect, and esteem. Second, the non-recognition or misrecognition of ethical subjects along any of these axes of self-formation is experienced as a harm or injustice that, under favourable social conditions, will motivate a struggle for recognition.

The research program that Honneth has developed is widely acknowledged as both an empirically insightful way of reflecting on emancipatory struggles for greater justice within such societies and a powerful way of generating a conception of justice and the good that permits the normative evaluation of such struggles. The aim of this volume is to offer a critical clarification and evaluation of this research

<sup>1</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, transl. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

program and particularly its relationship to the other major development in critical social and political theory over recent years – the focus on power as constitutive of practical identities (or forms of subjectivity) proposed by Michel Foucault and developed in a variety of ways by theorists such as Judith Butler, James Tully, and Iris Marion Young.

Consider, for example, that, for Honneth, struggles for recognition are social processes in which certain groups in society contest the predominant and, in their eyes, demeaning social standards of expectation and evaluation that ascribe to different members of society certain ‘appropriate’ roles, statuses, or characteristics. We can think here both of officially sanctioned forms of unequal treatment of citizens (apartheid, sexism) and of more informal forms of misrecognition in everyday interaction concerning, for instance, the treatment of cultural minorities, the relation between the sexes, and so on. If we want to understand the dynamics by which such forms of misrecognition are kept in place, an analysis of power relations seems necessary. For both official and more informal forms of misrecognition involve and articulate power relations that shape aspects of identity such that the identity of those who do not have the power to co-determine the terms of their legal and social status may come to involve an internalized sense of their powerlessness, inferiority and ‘appropriate’ place in the margins of society. Not least of the issues raised by this focus on recognition *and* power is the problem of distinguishing between ethical and ideological – power-based – forms of recognition, a task that Honneth takes on in his contribution to this volume.

In this Introduction, we begin with a reconstruction of the core of Honneth’s research project, before elaborating on the challenge posed to this project by philosophical accounts of power. We end with a brief introduction to the contributions to this volume and situate them in relation to the problematic of recognition and power.

## 1. HONNETH’S THEORY OF RECOGNITION

### a. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts

Ever since the publication of his earlier book, *The Critique of Power*,<sup>2</sup> the aim of Axel Honneth’s work has been to investigate the “moral

<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, transl. by Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1991).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

3

grammar” of social conflicts inscribed in the institutions and social relations characteristic of modern societies. In looking for the *moral* grammar of social conflicts, Honneth rejects the notion that social conflict is to be conceived as a basic feature of the human condition that derives simply from the self-interested character of human beings. This view, which is given powerful expression by Thomas Hobbes in the early modern period,<sup>3</sup> radically undermined the ancient Greek–Roman idea of social and political interaction – whether in harmonious or more agonistic forms – as directed toward the common good of society’s ethical life.<sup>4</sup> While critical of the metaphysical assumptions of Greek–Roman ethical and political thought, Honneth develops, through a reading of Hegel’s early work on the concept of recognition,<sup>5</sup> a critique of the atomistic, instrumental-rational assumptions concerning human agency that he identifies in the tradition inaugurated by Hobbes and that he takes to inform much contemporary liberal political philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

At the core of Honneth’s reading of Hegel is the idea that a social and political theory that works from such atomistic premises cannot account for human beings’ constitutive dependency on non-instrumental social relations for the many aspects of their identities and agency that touch upon their integrity as *moral subjects and agents*. Human beings’ moral subjectivity and agency stands in need of the recognitive relations of care, respect, and esteem with others in all phases and spheres of life. Such relations of recognition cannot be accounted for adequately in terms of a model of human beings as self-interested actors or, indeed, in terms of any atomistic model of

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Honneth, *Struggle*, 7–10. Of related interest is Honneth’s essay “The Limits of Liberalism: On the Political-Ethical Discussion Concerning Communitarianism,” transl. by Jeremy Gaines, in Axel Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. by Charles W. Wright (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 231–246.

<sup>5</sup> Honneth’s reading of Hegel’s early work is mainly based on “*System of Ethical Life*” (1802/03) and “*First Philosophy of Spirit*” (*Part III of the System of Speculative Philosophy* 1803/04), ed. and transl. by H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1979), and on “Jena Lectures in the Philosophy of Spirit,” in *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* (1805–6) with Commentary, ed. and transl. by Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983). See, for further relevant references to Hegel’s early work, Honneth, *Struggle*, 183n2.

<sup>6</sup> Honneth, *Struggle*, 11–30 and “The Limits of Liberalism.”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

human agency. On the contrary, such an account requires a model of human agency as constituted in and through relations with others, where one's formation as an ethical subject and agent is dependent on the responsiveness of others with respect to *care* for one's needs and emotions, *respect* for one's moral and legal dignity, and *esteem* for one's social achievements. In the absence of such responsiveness, Honneth argues, one cannot develop the practical relations to self – self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem – that are crucial to one's status as a competent ethical subject and agent. As Honneth summarizes a point regarding the experience of love from Hegel's *System of Ethical Life*:

... the superiority of interpersonal relationships over instrumental acts was apparently to consist in the fact that relationships give both interlocutors the opportunity to express themselves, in encountering their partner to communication, to be the kind of person that they, from their perspective, recognize the other as being.<sup>7</sup>

In relations of recognition, subjects reassure others and themselves of their *similarity* with regard to their being persons who all have similar needs, capacities, and abilities, which can only be sustained and further developed through intersubjective relations. At the same time, these dependent, and in important respects, similar persons reassure themselves and others of their status as *distinct* individuals – persons whose specific needs and emotions, moral-cognitive capacities, and distinctive social traits and abilities compose their unique individualities. In sum, relations of recognition enable *alter* and *ego* to develop, through the internalization of general social standards that are responsive to individuality, both a sense of *self* and a capacity for *other-regarding*, competent moral agency. Both Hegel and Honneth defend the far-reaching claim that without such non-instrumental relations of recognition, human beings simply cannot be the beings that our best phenomenological accounts suggest they are.<sup>8</sup> Relations of recognition are a necessary – one is tempted

<sup>7</sup> Honneth, *Struggle*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> This is the research project presented in *Struggle*. Honneth's interpretation of Hegel along these lines is reached by means of a sociological and developmental-psychological confirmation and a systematic reconstruction and further conceptual development of Hegel's original idea.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

to say a transcendental – condition of our moral subjectivity and agency.<sup>9</sup>

This conclusion, important as it is, does not mark the end of Hegel's and Honneth's work on recognition, but rather the establishment of their starting point. Both authors are dialectical thinkers who regard the substance of relations of recognition as historically variable and, therefore, not simply pre-given in needs and capacities that can be accounted for in terms of historically invariant anthropological categories.<sup>10</sup> For instance, it is quite clear that, in the course of history, understandings of what it means to receive care as an infant or a partner, to be respected as a moral subject and agent, or to be esteemed as a member of society with socially valuable traits and abilities have changed. Indeed, it seems that institutional and more informal standards of what constitutes due recognition are, and in all likelihood have always been, subject to interpretation and even contestation. To grasp the point, one need only think of, for example, the struggles by workers for fairer wages and working conditions as demanded by due recognition of the value of their work in society, or the struggles for independence by colonized people as demanded by their moral standing as human beings.<sup>11</sup> It is clear to see why this must be of fundamental concern to the theory of recognition. If it is true that what count as the generalized and dominant standards of recognition in a society can, from a moral point of view, be criticized as perpetuating relations of misrecognition, then it becomes necessary to understand by what social means, and in light of which criteria, misrecognized persons might claim full recognition for those needs, capacities, and abilities they feel do not receive the recognition they are due. This

<sup>9</sup> Writing about a political ethic based on a theory of recognition, Honneth has recently made a claim to this effect. See Axel Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser," in Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, transl. by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London/New York: Verso, 2003), 174.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–150.

<sup>11</sup> For an influential account of the social and moral logic of emancipatory struggles by the worker's movement, see, for instance, Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Basis of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1978). For such struggles by colonized peoples, see, for instance, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), and James Tully, *Strange Multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

is the point at which the idea of a *struggle* for recognition enters the scene.

We will come back later to such struggles and their historical meaning. For now, it is more important to end with a conclusion as to the *moral* grammar of social conflict. Once the notions of, first, relations of recognition as necessary conditions of moral subjectivity and agency and, second, the often-contested nature of generalized and dominant standards of recognition are accepted, it is only a small step to the insight that social conflicts that concern the adequate interpretation of such standards of recognition necessarily have a *moral* point. In conflicts over the adequate interpretation of dominant standards of recognition, members of society raise moral claims as to the adequate protection of the social conditions under which they can form, sustain, and further develop their identities as moral subjects and agents. What makes such claims moral is, first, that they concern *the social conditions of undistorted subjectivity and agency*<sup>12</sup> and, second, that they require of social agents *an attitude that goes beyond an immediate concern with their self-interest in being responsive to the needs of others*.<sup>13</sup>

#### b. Honneth's Project in Context

Having sketched the theoretical intuition guiding Honneth's project, it may be useful to situate Honneth's work with respect to other strands in social and political philosophy before exploring his project in more depth. This will both be helpful in bringing out the relevance of his project in contemporary debates and provide us with a bridge to the theme of recognition and power addressed in this volume. We have already noted that Honneth's work puts him in proximity with Hegel's early writings, from which the core of his theoretical project derives. More broadly, his project has an affinity with theoretical traditions that account for social conflicts in terms of struggles over the adequate interpretation of the normative standards central to a community's broad moral self-understanding or ethical life. This is a wide field, in which Kant's moral theory<sup>14</sup> can be placed just as easily as early

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser," 133.

<sup>13</sup> See Honneth's first contribution to this volume, "Recognition as Ethical Demand and Ideology."

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

7

Critical Theory's investigations into the paradoxes of capitalist society,<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault's ethical work,<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Habermas's communicative ethics,<sup>17</sup> John Rawls' liberal theory of justice,<sup>18</sup> and Charles Taylor's investigations into the moral sources of modernity.<sup>19</sup>

That this is the case is demonstrated by Honneth's engagement with these disparate theoretical stances in the articulation and development of his own project. With Kant, Habermas, and Rawls, Honneth shares a strong commitment to the notion of the autonomy of the person understood as a source of justified social claims that are brought into practices of public moral reasoning. Honneth has always stressed the importance of the public sphere as an arena in which struggles over the interpretation of standards of recognition are to be decided through public deliberation. Still, he has been remarkably consistent over the years in criticizing these authors for an understanding of autonomy that is both too narrow and too abstract (having "the character of a mere 'ought'"<sup>20</sup>) to inform us adequately about the way in which autonomy is thought to be embedded in the complex structures of the historically developed ethical life characteristic of modern societies. If autonomy is conceptualized in terms of following principles

<sup>15</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. by John Cummings (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1972); Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, transl. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 1974).

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, volume I*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, transl. by Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, transl. by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1993); Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, transl. by William Rehg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Honneth, *Struggle*, 5. In his criticism of these authors, Honneth's main inspirer is, again, Hegel. The quote is taken from the first sentence of *Struggle*, which in a way says as much about Honneth's own project as Hegel's: "In his political philosophy, Hegel set out to remove the character of a mere 'ought' from the Kantian idea of individual autonomy by developing a theory that represented it as a historically effective element of social reality, and he consistently understood the solution to the problem this posed to involve the attempt to mediate between the modern doctrine of freedom and the ancient conception of politics, between morality and ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that are either derived from transcendental or formal reflections on moral-cognitive conditions of our capacity for reasonable action (Kant, Habermas), or from a thought experiment as to how we would judge questions of justice if our judgment were not tainted by knowledge about our actual position in society (Rawls), the question remains as to how such an understanding of autonomy relates to practices of self-government among distinct and fully embodied persons who strive for freedom and well-being in and through multiple social settings such as the family, civil society, the workplace, cultural life, and so on. The key point is that Honneth's focus is on the social preconditions of effective, socially embedded autonomy rather than simply on an abstract understanding of the moral-cognitive requirements of autonomy alone:

the development and realization of individual autonomy is in a certain sense only possible when subjects have the social preconditions for realizing their life goals without unjustifiable disadvantages and with the greatest possible freedom.<sup>21</sup>

What relates Honneth to Horkheimer and Adorno's Critical Theory, to Foucault's studies of disciplinary and confessional practices, and to Taylor's investigations of ethical life is that their work may be said to explore these social preconditions of, and obstacles to, autonomy or self-government. Whereas Kant, Habermas, and Rawls start their theoretical projects from idealized conceptions of the autonomous and reasonable subject, and develop an ideal-conception of just and well-ordered societies from that starting point, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, and Taylor start their theoretical projects from rather thick (and, for that reason, often contested) descriptions of our not so just and well-ordered societies and the many roles we play within them. They may be said to introduce individuals' striving for autonomy or self-government as an influential but hard to attain ideal in these societies. Furthermore, they do not primarily direct their reflections on the social preconditions of self-government to procedural, moral-cognitive aspects of political deliberation. Rather, they investigate – each in his own manner – the wide terrain of, for instance, intimate relations in the family, the modern understanding of sexuality, the capitalist economy, the culture industry, corrective institutions, art, and religion. They do

<sup>21</sup> Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, 259.



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

so from perspectives that aim to unearth the socially alienating or disciplinary character of these social spheres of interaction and, in Taylor's case, their moral sources.

Through the broad scope of their investigations into the social realm, these authors develop insights into the demanding social preconditions of individual autonomy.<sup>22</sup> Although Honneth has criticized Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the administered society,<sup>23</sup> Foucault's notion of disciplinary power,<sup>24</sup> and aspects of Charles Taylor's communitarian reflections on the modern identity as unnecessarily sceptical regarding either the possibility (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Foucault) or the normative weight (Taylor) of individual autonomy,<sup>25</sup> Honneth's approach to autonomy is perhaps closer to theirs than to the various approaches deriving from the Kantian tradition. Honneth's analytical approach to the subject is as follows. First, we ask how best to describe the multiple institutions, social practices, and mutual patterns of expectation in society that make us into the (at best partially) autonomous subjects we are. Second, we ask how an adequate account of legitimate moral expectations as to greater autonomy of subjects could be extracted from the moral grammar of the social struggles for recognition that we witness in our societies.

## c. Recognition and Practical Relations-to-Self

In modern societies, Honneth distinguishes a three-fold set of socially sanctioned moral principles that circumscribe what should count as adequate recognition of members of society. He claims that these principles are not just contingent principles that express "how we do things around here." Rather, they are seen as the result of moral learning processes by which members of society, often over many generations,

<sup>22</sup> For a related insight into the required broadness of investigations into political freedom and practices of governance, see James Tully, "Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity," in: *Political Theory* 30/4 (2002), 533–555.

<sup>23</sup> Here, the criticism is especially directed against Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. See Axel Honneth, "From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory" and "Foucault and Adorno: Two Forms of the Critique of Modernity," in: *Fragmented World*, 92–120 and 121–131. See also Honneth, *Critique of Power*, chs. 2 and 3.

<sup>24</sup> See Honneth, "Foucault and Adorno: Two Forms of the Critique of Modernity," in *Fragmented World*, 121–131. See also Honneth, *Critique of Power*, chs. 4–6.

<sup>25</sup> See Honneth, "Limits of Liberalism."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86445-9 - Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory

Edited by Bert van den Brink and David Owen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

have gradually acquired knowledge of what it means to recognize each other with respect to various aspects of moral subjectivity and agency. Based on a review of historical and social theoretic research, Honneth argues that moral subjectivity and agency today require the formation of practical relations to self that are constituted in and through relations of recognition across three axes of self-formation.

The first of these axes is that of *love*, according to a principle of loving care and friendship for the concrete needs and desires of others that fosters their *self-confidence*. The second is that of *respect*, according to a principle of equal treatment with respect to every person's rights that fosters persons' *self-respect*. The third is that of *esteem*, according to a principle of achievement in the division of valuable social labour in society that fosters persons' *self-esteem*.<sup>26</sup> The three principles of recognition express the normative core of what in spheres of affective, moral/legal, and social relations counts as adequate recognition. And adequate recognition is understood from an ethical theory that defines the social "preconditions that must be available for individual subjects to realize their autonomy."<sup>27</sup> In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995: 129), Honneth summarises his theory of the forms and aims of recognition as shown in Table 1.1. The table shows the three axes of recognition.

<sup>26</sup> Honneth's most complete systematic development of this three-fold scheme is to be found in *Struggle*, 92–139. For a recent (re)formulation, in which the historical development of the principles is discussed at length, see Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition," 110–197.

<sup>27</sup> Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition," 178. Where, in the following, Honneth's theory will be interpreted as one that reflects on conditions of autonomous agency and personhood, this is done in knowledge of a certain tension in Honneth's theory as to what is meant by such conditions. On the one hand, he speaks of the autonomy of persons as a moral-cognitive capacity that is tied to modes of recognition characteristic of modern ideals of legal equality and the forms of self-respect they allow for members of society who claim civil, political, and social rights. On the other hand, he speaks of conditions of individual or personal autonomy of persons in intimate relations and in social relations in the economic division of labour within society. In this article, the focus is on conditions of autonomy in that broader sense, where principles of equal or fair treatment of persons as self-governing subjects and agents in all spheres are at stake. See Honneth, "Redistribution as Recognition," 177–8, where Honneth uses the broad conception of conditions of autonomy, and pp. 188–9, where he uses both the broad and the narrow one. See, for another account of both the broad and the narrow sense, Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation," in: *Social Research* 64/1 (1997), 16–35.