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Decentred autonomy and authenticity in Honneth*

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Abstract

Axel Honneth proposes a recognition theoretical approach to justice, where justice is a matter of the recognition of individuals in the three spheres of ethical life he identifies. The value of recognition is based on the value of 'self-realization'. Given the intimate relation between self-realization on the one hand and autonomy and authenticity on the other, autonomy and authenticity also play an important normative role in Honneth's recognition theoretical approach to justice. In this paper I will examine Honneth's conceptions of autonomy and authenticity. I will argue that these conceptions manage to meet some of the descriptive challenges faced by recognition theories, but fail to provide recognition with the required normative underpinnings. In order to gain or retain normative force, Honneth needs to provide an account of 'true self' or objective human well-being, which in turn would fail to meet the descriptive challenge and move dangerously close to traditional theory.

Introduction

Axel Honneth proposes a recognition theoretical approach to justice, according to which justice is a matter of the recognition of individuals in the three spheres of ethical life he identifies. The value of recognition in turn is based on the value Honneth attributes to 'self-realization'. Given the relation of recognition to the ideal of self-realization, it seems that autonomy and authenticity, either as conditions for or as constitutive of self-realization, must also play important roles in Honneth's proposed system.[1] It is important for Honneth that (i) autonomy and authenticity, and therefore self-realization, are attainable, i.e., that his account is descriptively accurate; and (ii) that autonomy and authenticity (and self-realization)

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retain the normative force he needs to ground his recognition theoretical approach to justice. So he has to meet what I call the 'descriptive challenge' and the 'normative challenge'. After exploring the conceptions of autonomy and authenticity found in Honneth and drawing out their relation to recognition and the ideal of self-realization I will argue that the notions of authenticity and autonomy put forward by Honneth can be read to meet the descriptive challenge, but in that case they fail to provide recognition with the required normative underpinnings that would provide a reliable link between 'self-realization' and recognition, such that recognition claims could actually derive their moral value from the ideal of self-realization,[2] i.e., they fail the normative challenge. The paper is divided into four parts: I will first give a brief overview of Honneth's recognition theory, before turning to his conception of decentred autonomy and proper self-relation in the second part. In the third part I will propose two readings of autonomy and authenticity: the strong reading would meet the normative challenge but fail the descriptive challenge; the weak reading meets the descriptive challenge but, as I will argue, fails to yield normative standards. I will conclude that the only way to retain the normative force for Honneth is to abandon (to some degree) descriptive accuracy, abstract further from the experience of injustice and propose a fairly detailed objective account of human well-being thus engaging in a difficult balancing act between critical and traditional theory.

I. Honneth's recognition theoretical approach to justice

Based on the descriptive value and the normative pull Axel Honneth ascribes to 'recognition', he proposes a 'recognition theoretical approach to justice', where justice is understood in terms of recognizing individuals' needs and legal and social status in order to allow individuals to form identities and be able to achieve self-realization. Moral progress consists in increasing 'the quality of social integration' by widening the scope of recognition in line with normative demands of legitimate recognition claims (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 175).

On the descriptive level Honneth holds that social and political movements and conflicts can best be explained in terms of an experience of 'moral injury' caused by withheld (perceived-to-be legitimate) recognition. Individuals are motivated to act by the experience of harm and the goal of social and political action is to gain recognition (of needs, rights or achievements).[3] Social and political dissatisfaction and conflict arise when one party feels that their needs, legal status or achievements are not recognised appropriately. Social conflicts themselves are really conflicts either about the standards of recognition, which have developed within certain contexts and histories (and hence are the outcome

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of cultural historical development) or about the application of the accepted grounds for recognition.

Honneth proposes a complex system of recognition. Reminiscent of Hegel's distinction between family, state and civil society, he distinguishes three different spheres of post-traditional ethical life with their own respective forms of recognition: the sphere of personal relations, the sphere of legal relations and the sphere of social relations. Corresponding to these spheres are different expressions of the principle of recognition: in the sphere of personal relations, which is constituted by our intimate relationships, familial relations and friendships, recognition consists in love, expressed in care for our needs; in the legal sphere recognition consists in respect for our legal rights and duties and the principle of equality; the form of recognition in the social sphere is esteem for our achievements. The three spheres, while distinct, interact in complex ways, e.g., misrecognition on the level of achievement can lead to legal misrecognition (and vice versa), misrecognition in the sphere of love can – at least indirectly – affect recognition relations in the two other spheres, etc.[4]

The experience of harm itself depends on the break-down of relations of mutual recognition. These relations are important for our development and maintenance of a sense of self and our ability to achieve self-realization. Honneth draws on a variety of sources to make his point here. Starting with the German Idealist view of subject-formation, where the subject only becomes aware of him- or herself as subject by being recognized as such by other subjects, Honneth finds empirical support for this position in developmental psychology and object-relations psychoanalytic theories. With reference to object relations psychoanalytic approaches, Honneth distinguishes three forms of 'self-relation' which are – to some degree – determined by relations of mutual recognition and which correspond to the different spheres of interaction: in his or her relation to primary caregivers and early peers, the child learns to develop self-confidence ('Selbstvertrauen'), understood as the ability 'to learn to regard one's internally experienced needs and desires as a part of one's person that can be articulated' (Honneth 2010: 265).[5] Here learning takes the form of experiencing the positive response to one's needs by one's caregivers. Next, the growing child, in regular interaction with peers slowly also develops self-respect ('Selbstachtung'), i.e., the child learns that he or she is capable of forming opinions and judgements and that these are regarded as valuable and reliable by others, so the child experiences him or herself as accountable ('zurechnungsfähig'). The third kind of self-relation can develop concurrently with the second and is a sense of self-worth ('Selbstwertgefühl'), where the child learns that he or she has original and valuable talents. Once developed, however, these attitudes towards self are not stable and require constant confirmation through the positive attitudes of others, i.e., recognition. If the development or maintenance of those self-relations

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fails, the individual is diminished in his or her ability to achieve self-realization. If, on the other hand, those attitudes towards oneself are developed. As a result, the individual is able to autonomously and authentically participate in the social world and thus create and apply the conditions necessary for self-realization.

The descriptive value of Honneth's approach in the context of subject formation and maintenance is controversial. Lois McNay (2008) accuses recognition approaches in general of conflating the normative and descriptive aspects of recognition and thereby giving a warped, oversimplified *descriptive* account of subject formation, leading to an equally warped view of subjects as autonomous, which in turn is desirable for the *normative* dimension of recognition theories. In other words, the normative role recognition is thought to play directs the descriptive account provided. She identifies recognition approaches' emphasis (sometimes even exclusive focus) on face to face interaction as a key problem. In contrast, McNay holds that subject formation, development and maintenance of a sense of self, self-respect, self-confidence and self-esteem take place against the backdrop of impersonal and institutionalised power structures and hierarchies (structures of oppression), the force and pervasiveness of which recognition approaches do not take into account.[6] McNay's concerns constitute, in large part, the descriptive challenge and so will be discussed in more detailed below. At this point though, it should be noted that Honneth does allow for the impact of impersonal structures of oppression: while he does not explicitly address the impersonal mechanisms involved in subject formation in the detail McNay offers, as shown below he acknowledges these factors regularly and his discussion of 'decentred autonomy' only makes sense in the light of a conception of subjects that does appreciate the effects of pervasive and opaque power structures on subject formation.

As indicated above, Honneth also sees a normative value in recognition. Partly, this value rests on the contribution recognition makes to the sense of self and the severe *moral* injuries experienced by individuals who do not receive (legitimate) recognition. However, severe injury is not automatically a 'moral' injury, and so Honneth requires something more than a mere descriptive account of the importance of recognition in order to make the normative case. Consequently, Honneth explicitly commits to an Aristotelian ethics, where self-realization takes centre stage (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 177).[7] Self-realization (like Aristotle's eudaimonia) is, on the one hand, to be regarded as the fundamental moral value and, on the other hand, Honneth believes that the desire of individuals to self-realize functions as an explanation of 'moral' motivation, or it explains the motivation of social movement or social struggles in general (and in this way, self-realization also possesses normative and descriptive value). Within this normative system built on the value of self-realization, recognition is only morally relevant in as far as it pertains to self-realization.[8]

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II. Decentred autonomy and 'authenticity'

In light of the normative system described above, it seems that 'authenticity' and 'autonomy' must play important roles in Honneth's theory of recognition. Recognition claims derive their normative value from their relation to individuals' ability to self-realize. In order for recognition claims to protect and promote self-realization, these recognition claims should pertain to issues relevant to self-realization, i.e., to our needs, desires, life-plans.[9] Usually we hold autonomous and authentic agents to be capable of knowing and realising their own needs, desires and life plans. In other words, recognition claims can only have normative value if they are authentic or autonomous or promote or protect authenticity and autonomy.[10] This does not mean that all authentic or autonomous recognition claims have (equal) normative value; it is possible for recognition claims to be authentic but morally obnoxious[11] so other moral principles have to be employed to settle the normative value of recognition claims and adjudicate between conflicting claims; rather, due to the relation between autonomy and authenticity to self-realization, recognition claims must be authentic or autonomous or promote or protect authenticity and autonomy as a prerequisite for them having normative value at all.[12]

Honneth identifies three criteria of classical autonomy, which need to be revised because empirical evidence and new theoretical developments suggest them as unattainable: transparency of self, control over self and linguistic independence. Honneth argues that, especially in light of psychoanalytic theories (and evidence), the self can no longer be plausibly regarded as self-transparent; rather, motives for action are often hidden from subjects' consciousness. This opacity of motives reduces the control subjects have over themselves. Further, subjects depend for the articulation and exploration of motives, beliefs, etc., on a language system with pregiven meanings, thus diminishing how occurrences (in the broadest sense) can be expressed and interpreted. In this way, Honneth argues, the self-'authorship' of individuals is affected (Honneth 2007a).

The challenges thus presented to the notion of self-determinacy in the classical notion of 'autonomy' can be met in one of three ways: by abandoning 'autonomy' as attainable at all, by taking a neo-idealist position and clinging to the classical ideal of autonomy in the face of evidence to the contrary, or, lastly, by reconceiving the self and autonomy in light of these challenges. In 'Decentred Autonomy' Honneth proposes a new conception of autonomy. Rather than self-transparency, decentred autonomy requires increasing (and never-ending) self-disclosure through the articulation 'without fear' of unconscious impulses, needs and desires (Honneth 2007a: 189). This in turn renders the autonomous subject dependent on others in two ways: first, there needs to be a growing linguistic scope to enable articulation; and second, based on evidence from

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developmental psychology, Honneth holds that the required articulation and self-discovery can only take place within a context of 'permanence of care shown… by concrete other…'(ibid.). Because transparency has given way to disclosure and articulation without fear, it is no longer possible to exert self-control by hierarchically ordering one's motives and desires along a chosen principle (as this may preclude the possibility of new disclosure); rather than a hierarchical organisation of one's needs, desires and motives, decentred autonomy merely requires that one can construct a coherent narrative, able to integrate 'disparate parts'(ibid.: 190), where this narrative is ethically reflective, i.e., it is coherent from the position of meta-wishes, or second order desires the agent reflectively embraces (where these values cannot be reduced to one single value). Lastly, Honneth argues that the classical aspect of moral autonomy, the application of universalizable moral principles, has to be modified in light of the constant influence of social pressure on subjects: the decentred-autonomous agent is always accompanied by feelings of guilt, arising from an inability to fulfil all the various social and moral demands and will thus become sensitive to 'the concrete predicaments and neediness which other subjects have to struggle with in their lives.'(ibid.: 191). As a result, instead of universalizability, the autonomous agent will be 'context sensitive' in the application of moral principles.

So, the decentred-autonomous agent, that is the agent who is autonomous 'under conditions in which the psyche is in principle not wholly under our control' (ibid.) is 'in a position to disclose needs creatively, to present his or her entire life in an ethically reflected way, and to apply universalist norms in a context-sensitive manner…' (ibid.).

Especially from the perspective of moral autonomy, however, Honneth's proposal seems peculiar. The ethically self-reflective narrative subject, combined with one or other variation on the 'superego' seem to suggest a new notion of autonomy that has lost the very core of the value of classical autonomy.[13] But, here I am interested in autonomy only in as far as it relates to self-realization. For this issue, what seems to protect the capacity to self-realize (i.e., that aspect of autonomy concerned with authenticity) is the notion of the disclosure of unconscious aspects of self, through articulation without fear (and the notion of reflective ethical narrative).

Before turning to a discussion of Honneth's view of decentred autonomy, I want to give a brief outline of Honneth's position on 'authenticity' or 'self-relation'.[14] In *Reification* (Honneth 2005) he proposes a view of authenticity as 'correct self-relation'. The term 'reification' is borrowed from Lukács to describe one of the 'pathologies' of modernity, a practical attitude we have towards the world and ourselves that deviates from correct praxis.[15] But, whereas for Lukács reification consists in every form of 'objectification' or 'de-personalization',[16] Honneth argues that some forms of objectification are necessary. To him only

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those instances of 'objectification' or 'de-personalization' which involve a 'forgetting of [due] recognition' are properly regarded as instances of 'reification'. Following Lukács, Honneth identifies three spheres of reification: the objective world, the intersubjective world and the intrasubjective realm. For our purposes only the last is relevant, because it is in contrast to the reification of self that we find the notion of proper self-relation or 'authenticity'.[17] Self-reification is also an objectification combined with forgetting (i.e., inability to realise the objectification). The self can be objectified in two ways: first, one can take a view of oneself as the object of one's knowledge, passive, already given, something to be discovered or detected; second, one can take the opposite view and regard oneself as the agent of all of one's character. In the first case the self becomes a passive object of detection, in the second case the self becomes the object of creation. Honneth contrasts self-reification with proper self-relation, what he calls 'expressionism':

'We neither perceive our mental states simply as objects, nor do we constitute them through our articulation, but we articulate them in accordance with that with which we are internally already familiar…' (Honneth 2005: 88).[18] We are already familiar with our feelings and desires because our mental states are given (not created through our articulation or consciousness of them) and we have learned to regard them – during the process of socialisation – as part of who we are and, moreover, as a part of who we are that we communicate to and share with others. Mental states may strike us as unfamiliar, if they are genuinely new states or if they go beyond our linguistic scope. Proper self-relation means that we relate these unfamiliar states back to familiar states and thus expand the horizons of familiarity (ibid.). So, against constructivist theories of self, Honneth's expressionism holds that desires and feelings are given. We are familiar with them. But familiarity is not the same as knowledge. We may be familiar with mental states that are diffuse and not a 'proper object of knowledge' (ibid.: 86). Moreover, we do not just have a neutral epistemological interest in them. In order to 'articulate' our mental states, Honneth maintains, we must first have a positive attitude towards these states. An attitude of 'care' or 'recognition'.[19] We must regard our mental states as worthy of articulation. Authenticity thus consists of a recognition of one's own feelings, needs and desires where recognition is an attitude of affirmation of value and care which prompts articulation. The authentic agent, in Honneth, is one who recognizes him or herself, who practices self-recognition.[20]

III. Authenticity, autonomy and the value of recognition

With Honneth's account of authenticity and inauthenticity and his notion of decentred autonomy in mind, I want to return to the roles those concepts must play within his recognition theoretical approach to justice.

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Autonomy and authenticity are (assumed to be) bearers of normative value because of their (putative) relation to self-realization. Recognition claims can only be considered to have moral value if they are related to autonomy and/or authenticity in specific ways: recognition claims must be expressions of autonomous and authentic agents and/or they must promote or protect authenticity and/or autonomy. So, autonomy and authenticity seem to be conditions of self-realization (it is only through autonomous and authentic recognition claims that self-realization and the circumstances of self-realization can be achieved). However, at times, it seems that self-realization is constituted by autonomy and authenticity (see esp. Honneth 1994 and 2011), so only those subjects who have achieved autonomy and authenticity are self-realized, and once they have achieved autonomy and authenticity they (where achieving autonomy and authenticity are on-going processes). While there is a difference between the conditional and the constitutive accounts, on both accounts autonomy and authenticity carry the normative weight. While autonomy and authenticity play an essential normative role, they must also be descriptively accurate or attainable. If we recall, one of the problems with Honneth's recognition approach is that it supposedly misrepresents subject-formation in such a way as to give rise to the belief that individuals can attain full autonomy and authenticity, such that their recognition claims are normatively reliable (or such that they can fully participate in the social world as to achieve self-fulfilment), but that in reality, due to the impact of oppressive power structures, individuals cannot attain full autonomy or authenticity (hence there can be no recognition claims issued by autonomous or authentic agents, though there might still be recognition claims that promote autonomy accidentally).[21]

It seems that what I call a 'weak' reading of decentred autonomy and expressionist self-relation can successfully meet the descriptive challenge. On the weak reading individuals are autonomous if they are capable of self-discovery, articulation and evaluative reconciliation, irrespective of the source of aspects about themselves they discover or the impact social structures have on the way individuals reconcile unconscious aspects and social expectations. They are authentic if they recognize and positively affirm their needs and desires, irrespective of the source of these needs and desires. In this sense autonomy and authenticity are achievable even in the context of permanent and pervasive influence of impersonal structures and dynamics of oppression on subject formation. Decentred autonomy and Honneth's conception of authenticity are cut to fit a view of the self, which is opaque to itself, fragmented and unable to exert complete self-control.

However, in so far as Honneth succeeds on the descriptive level, his decentred autonomy and expressive self-relation fail on the normative level. Autonomy and authenticity have been transformed into concepts that no longer

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obviously carry the same value as classical autonomy and authenticity, and they no longer relate to self-realization in the required way (except if self-realization is to be re-conceived in light of a 'damaged' sense of self, in which case self-realization would lose at least some of its normative value).

In order for authenticity or expressive self-relation to be relevant for a morally significant notion of self-realization, we would have to give what I call a 'strong' reading of Honneth's account: authenticity consists of our recognition (including our affirmation) of our *true* needs, feelings and desires, where 'true' here emphasizes needs, desires and feelings that are not the result of external structures of oppression, which are all pervasive in our lives. However, this interpretation is not equipped to respond to the descriptive challenge. In other words: if we read Honneth's account in a way that meets the descriptive challenge (weak reading), the authentic agent recognizes (and values) his or her needs and desires, even though at least some of these desires will inevitably be the result of pervasive, impersonal, institutionalised powers of oppression and are part of the reproduction and maintenance of these power structures (which are at their very core obstacles to self-realization). A strong reading of Honneth's conception of authenticity, in turn, would exclude needs and desires that are the result of oppressive power structures, but would fail to be practically attainable in the light of the pervasiveness of these power structures. In so far as authenticity is practically unattainable, recognition claims do not originate with authentic agents, and if they promote or protect potential authenticity then they will do so accidentally.[22]

The notion of decentred autonomy does not fare any better, and for similar reasons. As Honneth admits, the notion of disclosure of unconscious motivation through articulation without fear depends on others, not merely for their continued care and support (in the sphere of love) but also for the availability of a language in which these needs, motivation and desires can be articulated. But language is a prime example of oppressive power structures at work (see McNay 2008: 69-74). Decentred autonomy relates to expressive self-relation in a similar way as autonomy relates to authenticity in Taylor: decentred autonomy is the potential we have to discover our needs, desires and motivations within the constrictions of oppressive structures, which are what classically autonomous agents seek to overcome. At first we might think that a strong reading of decentred autonomy is possible, after all, Honneth's account of decentred autonomy contains a notion of reconciliation between the unconscious and conscious aspects of self. The decentred autonomous agent not only self-discloses unconscious aspects, but makes 'reflective decisions' (Honneth 2007a: 189) about them. This seems to allow some space for at least the possibility to overcome the effects of power structures embedded in language and similar external, oppressive influences on self-disclosure. The ideally autonomous agent

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is free from unconscious motives which he or she has rendered conscious and rationally judged. However, Honneth himself insists on the fact, that self-disclosure is an 'unending' process (ibid.), as such decentred autonomy is never fully achieved. Moreover, given our dependence on language and others in the process of self-disclosure, it seems that there is no guarantee that those motives we take ourselves to self-disclose are actually accurately identified. If we misidentify our unconscious motives (or mis-ascribe), our rational judgements of them are possibly irrelevant (as they do not relate to our 'true motives') and do not help to overcome oppressive structures. Honneth himself seems to suggest that 'due to the impact of poetic innovations' (ibid.), our language has sufficient scope to express previously inexpressible unconscious impulses. This however, is not satisfactory. It may well be the case that as language develops the expressive scope widens (though some would probably insist that the opposite is the case), but that is not to say that we can now articulate and differentiate between different unconscious motives reliably, i.e., that the scope is such that all our unconscious features can be expressed or detected or that we (and the others we rely on) approach self-disclosure in a sufficiently unbiased manner. Lastly, if Honneth takes McNay's worries seriously (and hence answers to her descriptive challenge) he possibly would have to take into account the effect of pervasive impersonal power structures on our rational judgements themselves. Overall, however, the fact that full self-disclosure is regarded as unachievable, combined with the dual dependence on others suffice to rule out a strong reading of decentred autonomy.[23]

Above arguments leave us with two possibilities regarding the relation between autonomy, authenticity and self-realization. On the one hand, if we conceive of self-realization in terms of decentred autonomy and proper self-relation, thus assuming a strong link between the three, self-realization itself seems to lose moral value. Here, self-realization would consist in the articulation and affirmation of needs, desires and motives, which may be the result of oppressive power structures (and perpetuate these structures). That is, self-realization here is not in any obvious way opposed to oppressive structures. Alternatively, we could maintain a view of self-realization which relates to the actualization of individuals' true desires, choices, motives, etc. These true choices would be threatened by oppressive structures and hence self-realization is opposed to such structures and retains moral value. But this conception of self-realization is no longer intimately linked to notions of decentred autonomy and proper self-realization, i.e., it is not clear why we should assume that recognition claims issued by agents who approximate decentred autonomy and have proper self-relation promote or protect this strong sense of self-realization. This is problematic because on this account we can ignore recognition claims by subjects and just refer to our theory of objective true needs and desires.

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Overall, in order for self-realization and notions deriving value from the ideal of self-realization to have normative value they need to refer to some sense of self that is opposed to that self whose needs, motivations and desires are the outcome and reproduction of those influences thought to hinder individual freedom and development. What is required is either a notion of a 'true self', or a more substantive notion of human well-being (which is to be realized and the realization of which requires our standing in relations of mutual recognition). The notion of a 'true self' – on the practical level – seems to fall victim to the descriptive challenge. Worse than that, however, it is implausible in the context of a recognition approach. Here the self is the outcome of interpersonal relations, which is what makes recognition so valuable and the lack thereof so harmful. It would appear that the only option left for Honneth is to propose an account of human well-being that does not rely on notions of self-realization and recognition but itself provides a normative grounding for the value of both.

At this point one might object: it does not follow from the unattainability of strong notions of decentred autonomy and proper self-relation that Honneth's normative framework is in trouble. Moral theories can appeal to an ideal as normative standard which can never be actually obtained. The reply here basically accuses above criticism of a conflation of the normative and the empirical. After all, Honneth has in place a theoretical framework of judging recognition claims by asking a) whether the claim promotes emancipatory self-realization (even if such self-realisation can never be complete) and b) whether the claim increases or at least does not diminish the scope of recognition (i.e., the number of people who receive legitimate recognition). So, it offers mechanisms to distinguish between genuine, normatively valuable recognition claims and morally obnoxious, oppressive recognition claims. The question of whether it is practically possible to move towards a society in which autonomy and authenticity can be fully realised is a separate question and not one Honneth has to answer.

However, if this response is aimed to defend the Honnethian account that relies on decentred autonomy and authenticity and resulting (weak) notion of self-realization (short: the weak reading), rather than an account supplemented by an objective account of genuine self-realization or human well-being, it misses two important points:

First, on the weak reading it is not even obvious that we theoretically ought to value decentred autonomy and proper self-relation and the resulting form of self-realization. So that the weak reading does not even theoretically serve as a standard of evaluating recognition claims.

Second, the weak reading does not even theoretically serve as a means to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate claims. Let me illustrate this with an example: consider the relatively new phenomenon sociologists have called the 'precariat'. The precariat is a social group consisting of people from various

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socio-economic and educational backgrounds who all find themselves in a (long-term) situation of insecure working conditions (temporary contracts, often low pay, etc.). We can imagine two members of the precariat belonging to two different social movements, Karl and Robert. Karl's movement aims at changing employment policies which have led to the creation and spread of the precariat: they want to abolish the precariat (or rather the insecure work conditions). Karl can make his argument along Honnethian lines: members of the precariat are withheld their due recognition on the level of social relations because their contribution to the market is not adequately valued, moreover they are prevented from participating in certain social practices (they cannot get mortgages, become house owners, plan a holiday, contribute to private pension funds, etc.). The specifics of the work situation also diminishes the opportunity of members of the precariat to engage in self-sustaining relations of mutual recognition in the private sphere as they have no sufficient stability (e.g., they may have to relocate often due to changing work contracts) or leisure time to build and maintain intimate relations or families.

Robert belongs to a social movement that wants to abolish rigid work conditions. For him the precariat is not insecure but flexible and his movement aims at changing the policies so as to increase the number of people who are thus flexible. Robert also argues his point along Honnethian lines: increased flexibility to him is an increased freedom; people are forced out of their comfort zones and must thus discover new aspects about themselves, new confidence, new strengths, and new desires. Precarious employment contracts also remove traditional class boundaries (as the precariat consists of people from various backgrounds) and increase social solidarity, thus broadening the scope of relations of genuine mutual recognition amongst employees. Moreover, such contracts contribute to market developments that allow everybody to satisfy various needs and desires quickly and cheaply. Robert and his fellow fighters also experience suffering, they suffer from the prejudice of those who ascribe to the dogma of 'secure work' and 'planning', which leads to misrecognition of their freedom (as insecurity); traditional, rigid views on work life threaten new found solidarity, undermine new relations of mutual recognition and endanger the kind of market progress that allows fulfilment of needs and desires.[24] Importantly we can easily imagine Karl and Robert (and the fellow members of the respective social movements) to satisfy the criteria of decentred autonomy and proper self-relation (weak reading).

Honneth has two ways of responding. He can try to adjudicate between the competing claims (i) with reference to the standards mentioned above, i.e., his notion of 'moral progress', emancipation and genuine appeal to recognition principles or (ii) he can adapt a version of his 'recognition as ideology'.

(i) As mentioned earlier, Honneth has a framework that allows him to evaluate recognition claims by examining, whether they overall aim to widen the scope of those who can be legitimately recognized (moral progress) and whether

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they promote emancipation and refer to one of the principles of recognition. Applied to Karl and Robert, it seems both of them aim at widening the 'recognition scope' (as opposed to racist or other obviously morally obnoxious claims, who aim to exclude people from relations of mutual recognition) according to their respective views on self-realization; equally, according to their views their claims promote emancipation and refer to the recognition principle.

(ii) In 'Recognition as Ideology' and *Das Ich im Wir* (Honneth 2007b, 2010)[25] Honneth considers a slightly different problem: the possibility of acts of recognition as ideology, i.e., as a means to encourage individuals to internalize, submit to and perpetuate oppressive power structures. He puts forward criteria by which we distinguish genuine (institutional) acts of recognition from acts of recognition as ideology. Genuine recognition consists of acknowledging and positively appreciating the value of newly discovered aspects of individuals. This positive appreciation is not merely cognitive but should also bring about a modification in behaviour. The newly valued aspect, should be aspects the recognized individuals themselves can evaluatively affirm (i.e., aspects that the individuals themselves judge to be positive and do not experience as restrictive). The evaluative aspect of recognition must involve structural changes in society so as to 'ensure the material prerequisites for realizing [these] new evaluative qualities…'.[26] Recognition as ideology mimics the evaluative aspect but lacks this material component. For various reasons this material criterion is problematic as it stands[27] , but we can modify it slightly to include a preparedness to change material structures. Applied to the problem at hand we could say that those recognition claims that merely express an internalization of recognition as ideology are illegitimate. So, we would now try to claim that Robert's (or Karl's) recognition claims are actually merely internalized forms of recognition as ideology, e.g., Robert has fallen for the neo-liberal rhetoric, which passes off a socially disadvantageous positions as 'new opportunity', but which actually only aims to encourage individuals to submit to and help to reproduce oppressive power structures rather than change structures so as to materially manifest the value of these 'new opportunities'. We are allowed to make this judgment because genuine recognition of the 'precariat' as a valuable social group would come with a change to the current (institutional) structures, so as to match the new value with material resources (for example). But as it is, the 'recognition' of the precariat lacks any impetus for structural change in that way. This seems an odd reply to Robert, who makes no claims about the material structures in such a way: what he values about the precariat is (structurally) intrinsic to the precariat itself, e.g., flexibility. Further, his claims grow out of a willingness to change material structures (e.g., loosen rigid labour regulations). So it seems the internalization of ideology does not offer a solution, except if we have a more objective account of the structural changes that we ought to aim at.[28]

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It is clear from Honneth's writings on the importance of employment and the role it plays in social esteem (Honneth 2007a: 75-77) and his discussion of the employment market (Honneth 2011: 457-458), whose claims he would judge to be genuine recognition claims. Such judgements, interestingly, refer implicitly to objective views of the human good. What Honneth ultimately judges is the 'truth tracking' of Karl's and Robert's claims regarding *true* self-realization. Honneth claims that self-realisation requires stability in the form of reliable work conditions, including clear separation of work-time and leisure time, etc., (see Honneth 2011: 457): he does not refer to the demands made by decentredly autonomous agents or requirements of decentred autonomy. Once Honneth has in place an account of genuine self-realization (or 'true needs' or human well-being) he can claim that Robert acts from 'false consciousness', he is hindered in his emancipation without even realising it. Honneth can now also make claims about Robert's proper self-relation (which he has achieved to a somewhat lesser degree than Karl). Honneth could possibly now adopt a strong reading of decentred autonomy and conclude that Robert and his friends do not really engage in rational reflection on desires, but are swayed by advertisements and industry rhetoric. But all of these judgements stem from objective, substantial conceptions of the good and they are made irrespective of any specific recognition claims that are made by actual subjects.

In some sense, Honneth is comfortable with this position. He regards it as one of the strengths of his account that he does not depend on the articulation of the experience of injustice or recognition claims, that his account can also deal with 'silent injustices', those violations that people suffer from either unknown to them or (at this point) nexpressible for them. Moreover, some some recognition claims are illegitimate they have to be overridden. However, the account of 'true needs' or *genuine* self-realization (or emancipation) that Honneth has to provide (and implicitly assumes in much of his discussions) is more detailed, further removed from the realm of experiences and more objectivist than the one he takes himself to be committed to.

This should trouble Honneth slightly. First, there is a certain tension between fleshing out a more detailed account of true needs and human well-being and the place he gives to discursive practices in discovering needs. When he discusses possible remedies to his analysis of contemporary consumerism (and the powerlessness of consumers), a 'discursive mechanism' is not only necessary, it seems, to mobilise people to act (and become an effective social movement) but also to establish (discover through discourse) exactly what needs ought to be satisfied (and can be satisfied) by what form of consumerism (see, for example, Honneth 2011: 400-410). But if he provides a conception of human well-being that is detailed enough to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate claims, it seems he must already have decided which needs must be

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fulfilled, and which should be ignored (because their fulfilment perpetuates oppression).[29]

Moreover, any account he gives will be provisional. Being authentic and autonomous in the weak sense himself – like all of us – and thus having a diminished capacity for distinguishing between true and false needs or true emancipation and oppression perpetrating self-realization. Again, this is a price that he can pay, but it would put him in the very position he claims Fraser is in with regards to the norms that govern participatory parity (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

Lastly, the normative aspect of Honneth's account will lose its descriptive pull and, as such, he again faces a similar problem to Fraser: he has difficulty in explaining the motivation for social struggles, at least if he wants motivation to be strongly linked to moral legitimacy. And of course, the further he abstracts from the empirically given and experienced, the more he is in danger of imposing a theory (possibly of proposing a new 'ideology') and thus leaving the path of Critical Theory moving towards traditional theory.[30]

To sum up then, in this article I have shown that Honneth's recognition theoretical approach to justice and especially his proposal of a revised account of decentred autonomy and authenticity as proper self-relation manages to meet the descriptive challenge presented to recognition theories, but only at the cost of losing the normative pull. If Honneth wants to propose a normative framework within which social critique is possible he will have to give up some of the descriptive pull of his theory and provide a fairly detailed account of genuine self-realization, true needs or objective human well-being. However, given the pervasiveness of oppressive power structures, the facts of opacity and dependence, such an account itself will always be provisional and open to revision. There is of course a tension between the project of Critical Theory itself (and its task of ideology critique) and the need to give an objective account of well-being which will have to be somewhat removed from the actual experiences of injustice and oppression, which Honneth would need to address once more, were he to supplement his recognition theoretical approach.

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Notes

[1] Honneth commits explicitly to the value of self-realization (e.g., Fraser and Honneth 2003: 176), the value of autonomy (e.g., Fraser and Honneth 2003: 176, 259), and the value of proper

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self-relation (e.g., Fraser and Honneth 2003: 259). He himself never proposes a relation between those values. So we can either read Honneth as having changed his mind about the grounding value (but as above references suggest, he not only moves from autonomy to self-realization over the years, though he does that to some extent, he also commits to all three values at the same time) or we can read him as pluralist about value, with (at least) three equal values that ground the recognition theoretical approach to justice. Or, lastly, we can read him as a value pluralist, where the fundamental values are related to each other in a specific way. Relating autonomy and proper self-relation to self-realization, either as constitutive or as a condition of self-realization, has two advantages: (i) Honneth's account of decentred autonomy seems to make most sense and carry some normative force if it is interpreted in relation to self-realization, so autonomy is valuable because it enables the agent to realize aspects of her or himself; (ii) such a relation gives us a better grasp of the notion of self-realization, which is then a realization of those aspects the agent has discovered (about him or herself), rationally evaluated and integrated with other aspects (including social demands). Reading Honneth in this way does not weaken his account or magnify the problem. The argument put forward in this article would be equally damaging to a pluralist conception, because it would (i) question the normative value of autonomy and proper self-relation (which are two of the values that provide the normative ground of recognition theory) but also (ii) there would remain the problem of an overly vague notion of self-realization.

[2] For those who reject a constitutive or conditional link between autonomy, proper self-relation and self-realization, the problem would look slightly different: there would be a gap between the normative value of autonomy and the normative value of recognition claims.

[3] The monolithic interpretation of social movements has been much criticized. For example, Fraser holds that the recognition approach proposed by Honneth, which sees all social struggle as a struggle for recognition, misses out important aspects of social and political injustice and is, moreover, stuck on the level of moral psychology. According to Fraser, distributive justice and recognition theories are two irreducible aspects of justice, corresponding to objective and intersubjective aspects of social justice. Because it is impossible to subsume all recognition struggles under the distributive view and vice versa, Fraser proposes a 'two-dimensional approach to justice' (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 35). In his reply, Honneth counters that even conflicts about distribution appeal, ultimately, to different forms of recognition principles and hence can be subsumed under a differentiated and complex recognition theory. Moreover, only recognition approaches can explain motivation for social action. While the Honneth-Fraser debate is important in other contexts, at this point I am merely interested in the interpretation of social movements that emerges from Honneth's replies.

[4] The complexity of recognition proposed by Honneth motivates Fraser's point of modifying recognition 'beyond recognition'. Fraser, also, maintains that even the complexity misses aspects of distribution debates and does not prevent the recognition approach to be stuck on the level of moral psychology (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Menke argues that the legal sphere cannot be a sphere of recognition in Honneth's sense, and even finds the two in opposition (Menke 2009).

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[5] '…eine Stufe…auf der gelernt wird, die innerlich erlebten Bedürfnisse und Wünsche als artikulationsfähigen Teil der eigenen Person zu begreifen…' (Honneth 2010: 265).

[6] McNay 2008: 128-150.

[7] Self-realization here seems to take over also some of the role previously ascribed to autonomy (see Honneth 1994).

[8] Honneth defends his commitment to self-realization by pointing out that some such conception of human good underlies all liberal theories, if only 'secretly' and 'ashamedly'. Presumably, critique is not possible without a vantage point, which can only be given by experience, if we can interpret the normative aspect of experience (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 178).

[9] It seems appropriate to briefly draw attention to Charles Taylor's account of autonomy, authenticity and recognition. Taylor is very explicit about the relation between respect, recognition and autonomy and authenticity respectively. His recognition theory combines two – at times conflicting – aspects: the politics of equal dignity (based on a notion of autonomy) and the politics of difference (based on notion of authenticity). There are difficulties with respect to his account of authenticity and consequently with regards to identifying the exact moral underpinning of the politics of difference (see Cook 1997) but his proposal is that recognition claims derive their value because they are either demanded by our moral commitment to autonomy or authenticity, where autonomy is conceived of in roughly Kantian terms as the potential to form a notion of the good life and to choose once identity and authenticity is (arguably) best understood as the particular choices individuals do make with respect to their identity (see, for example, Taylor 1994). I will suggest a parallel relation in Honneth between autonomy and proper self-relation below.

Honneth and Taylor also share a dialogical approach to self which results in a view of authenticity that seems opposed to Rousseaunian notions of a 'true self' as a core which is to be discovered and realized independent of the input of others and at times against others in dialogue (e.g., Taylor 1989, 1991); for a good discussion of the relation to Rousseau's notion of authenticity, see Reisert 2000.

[10] In *Kampf um Anerkennung* Honneth (1994) is very explicit about the relation between autonomy and recognition. Here the value of relations of mutual recognition lies in their contribution to the development and maintenance of autonomy. Some parts of *Das Recht der Freiheit* suggest a return to the emphasis on (moral) autonomy (especially against an overly individualistic notion of self-realization), Honneth 2011: 70-80.

[11] Taylor suggests a solution to this problem in terms of intelligibility of choices (Taylor 1991), whereas Honneth, at some point, simply seems to assume that at least decentredly autonomous agents, automatically have a caring attitude towards others (Honneth 2007a). I will forgo detailed discussion here, but just mention that it seems possible that some obnoxious claims are intelligible to some others (a group of equally obnoxious people) and equally, while decentred autonomy requires some care, it is not obvious it requires care (also) for non-obnoxious groups (the problem is similar to one Hegel faces, concerning the move to universal recognition. See, for example, Wood 1990).

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[12] Both Honneth and Taylor are aware of this problem and offer their own solutions. Taylor links the need for recognition of our particular choices to 'intelligibility' and argues that on the level of intelligibility morality enters (Taylor 1991). Honneth offers a two-step process to evaluate recognition claims: in a first step recognition claims have to be shown to appeal to the principle of recognition (which claims linked to self-realization in the way outlined do); secondly, it has to be shown that recognizing the contested claims would further moral progress (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

[13] Arguably, the moral value of autonomy does to some extent depend on notions of independence. While independence need not be absolute (as this would suggest an implausible notion of subjects), the autonomous agent needs to be able to form judgements and opinions independent of others. So, even if we admit social relations as essential to subject formation and language acquisition, the autonomous agent must not continuously depend (essentially) on others for the formation and articulation of judgements, conceptions of the good life, etc.

[14] To interpret 'proper self-relation' as authenticity may strike one as problematic. Honneth himself does not use the term 'authenticity', (in fact, in his most recent treatment, Honneth is very critical of authenticity and its moral value; however, he seems to employ a rather narrow view of authenticity here. See Honneth 2011: 70-76) yet the vocabulary he uses – the notion of an 'original' way of being or relating to oneself, for example – is that of authenticity, so that Ferrara's interpretation of self-relation as authenticity seems justified (see Ferrara 2010). Moreover, interpreting proper self-relation as authenticity (in the sense of a true way of relating to oneself rather than in an overly self-centred way) will also enrich our understanding of autonomy. As much as Honneth resists talk of authenticity, his conception of decentred autonomy makes most sense as a conception of autonomy whose value derives from its relation to authenticity (e.g., decentred autonomy is valuable because it enables individuals to relate to themselves [and the world] positively, with care and recognition). Thus Honneth's concept of proper self-relation relates to decentred autonomy in a way analogous to the way Taylor's autonomy relates to authenticity. Further, this interpretation of Honneth (i) does not weaken his position and (ii) will not impose on Honneth the very kind of authenticity talk he resists (authenticity as a way of being *against* others). Overall, in the context of this paper, it might not only be justified but also help to interpret 'proper self-relation' as a conception of 'authenticity' (keeping in mind, however, that Honneth has a critical attitude towards classical notions of authenticity which he regards as conflicting with autonomy [see Honneth 2004]).

[15] More precisely, the correct praxis is the original ['ursprüngliche'] (Honneth 2005: 27) praxis, of which reification is a deviation. Honneth argues that the original praxis must be prior to reification, both chronologically (i.e., we must first have had a pre-reification practical attitude towards each other and the world, otherwise relations between us – of any nature – would not be possible) and epistemologically prior.

[16] For a discussion of further differences between Lukács and Honneth, see Jütten 2010.

[17] Reification of other individuals occurs when we forget that we owe all knowledge of the other to an attitude of 'care' or 'recognition' and hence begin to see the other merely as an

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object of our epistemic world. To draw out the contrast with Lukács more clearly: reification in Honneth is an objectification of the other, combined with an inability to realise this objectification. Objectification is in itself already a misrecognition of the other, a failure to recognize the other as a feeling, needing subject with intrinsic value. Honneth's exposition of reification of others is problematic. In his attempt to clearly distinguish his position from Lukács' notion of reification as objectification, he emphasizes the role of forgetting in reification-as-misrecognition. But when he introduces forgetting (of our original 'caring' relation to others) as 'total amnesia' (Honneth 2005: 71), his account looks rather implausible. However, when he interprets 'total amnesia' in terms of (mere) 'inattention' a few sentences later (ibid.), the account no longer looks very different from his interpretation of Lukács' conception of reification.

[18] 'Wir nehmen unsere mentalen Zustände weder einfach wie Objekte wahr, noch konstitutieren wir sie durch unsere Bekundungen, sondern wir artikulieren sie nach Maßgabe des uns innerlich jeweils bereits Vertrauten…' (Honneth 2005: 88).

[19] As part of his argument in *Reification* Honneth interprets the proper relation (to self and others) along the lines of a Heideggerian notion of 'care', which he then interprets as 'recognition' (Honneth 2005: 41).

[20] There are two problems in his account of proper self-relation. First, it is not clear – within Honneth – why articulation of one's desires requires an affirmation (as judgement of worthiness) of these needs and desires. It seems equally plausible, that subjects aim to articulate their needs and desires because failing to do so causes suffering to themselves, given that needs and desires aim at fulfilment regardless of whether or not they are deemed 'worthy'. Clearly, affirmation means more for Honneth, than merely giving in to desires and needs, expressing them in order to be better placed at fulfilling them. Affirmation is a positive evaluative appropriation. Second, Honneth contrasts his authentic subject with inauthentic self-relations. His examples here are examples of subjects 'strategically' creating needs and desires and this seems problematic. It is not clear whether a) the strategic manipulation of one's needs and desires does not always involve an affirmation (and ordering) of one's needs and desires or b) manipulating one's needs and desires itself could be regarded as self-realization.

[21] Since judgements about the condition in which autonomy is possible are made by subjects who are not fully autonomous, and who are hence diminished in their understanding of autonomy and its conditions, such judgements cannot be assumed to be reliable.

[22] See previous footnote (n.17); the same problem applies to authenticity.

[23] Even if one is not convinced by this argument, it has little bearing on the overall argument: if a strong reading of decentred autonomy was possible, it would operate with notions of appropriate rational judgements, and in the end also refer to substantial conceptions of human well-being (what is the appropriate rational judgement conforms to what really contributes to human well-being), and so the argument below still applies.

[24] If this example seems implausible, we could easily consider the argument between feminists and some post- (or even anti-) feminists, where the latter accuse the former of

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being oppressive. The language of feminism, the concepts and tainting of vocabulary that came with the arrival of feminism, so the claim, does not permit women to choose certain roles (mostly traditional) without thereby suffering severe loss of respect and esteem. The claim here is a strong one: the arrival of feminism spells oppression for some women. Again, in order to evaluate this claim we would probably not want to engage in a game of numbers (for example, how many women experience being oppressed by feminism as opposed to being potentially emancipated?), as this does not seem to meet the normative core of the question (moreover, it is not clear who would win the numbers game). Rather we would refer to more substantial, objective notions of self-realization and its conditions.

[25] Honneth 2010: 103-130; Honneth 2007b: 323-347.

[26] Honneth 2007: 346.

[27] Honneth is aware of the fact that the criterion seems too demanding, as there can be 'gaps between the evaluative promise and its material fulfilment' (Honneth 2005: 346-347). He maintains that these gaps should only be temporal, albeit they may stretch for a lengthy amount of time. Allowing temporal gaps – provided that they are closed at some point – however, causes new problems: Honneth claims that the recognition of workers as 'entrepreneurs' is ideological, because it does not come with the material or structural changes that would fully realize this new evaluation. However, with time, it may be that (accidentally) the material conditions change such that these 'entrepreneurs' are better off than the 'workers' used to be (in accordance with the evaluative expectations associated with the term 'entrepreneur'). Surely though, this material change does not render 'entrepreneur' talk less ideological.

[28] Honneth does add a historical dimension: only acts that value aspects of individuals or groups that are new and do not represent aspects that used to be valuable (in the past) within a repressive social structure are acts of recognition (so, valuing a wife for being especially obedient to her husband is not an act of recognition or even of recognition as ideology). But again, Karl and Robert could accuse each other with equally good reason of this form of 'regression' (Robert could claim that Karl aims at a structural change that is historically backtracking and hence not progressive; Karl could make a similar claim about Robert, given that deregulation of the labour market is also something that appeals to an old status quo).

[29] I want to emphasize again: the discovery of true needs, the conditions of true emancipation, etc., cannot be left to actual discourse and reliably retain normative force because (i) it is possible for decentredly autonomous agents with proper self-relation to discover needs and desires which do not contribute to their well-being (in fact hinder well-being), and (ii) within discourse we are all at most decentredly autonomous and as such can only distinguish genuinely emancipatory claims from illegitimate claims with reference to theories of objective well-being.

[30] While ideology critique is aimed most explicitly at liberalism and its proclaimed neutrality and objectivity, critical theorists should be distrustful of any theory that claims neutrality and objectivity.

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