

## **Internal Injuries Some Further Concerns with Intercultural and Transhistorical Critique**

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In the Fall 2008 issue of *Lyceum*, Jordan Bartol illuminates some problems with Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, ultimately concluding that it is insufficient for cross-cultural critique. In this paper, I first examine the differences between internal and external critique as described by Antti Kauppinen, and where both he and Honneth think recognition theory fits. I then examine Honneth's conceptions of self-realization and autonomy and argue that despite his attempts at establishing them as a universally held normative core for social critique, they are both individually and cultural relativistic. Furthermore, in an important departure from Bartol's argument, I suggest that it is not the question of progressive priority that we need to ask of Honneth's notion of historical moral progress. Rather, I contend that we must ask whether or not historical moral progress can be used for internal critique *at all*, since, as I argue, it points to external principles. Finally, I conclude that Honneth has insufficiently justified his theory of recognition as universalist internal critique and that at best, he advocates a mixed stance, composed of both internal and external methods of critique.

### **Forms of Social Critique**

Axel Honneth's recognition theory is an attempt at establishing a normative ground for internalist social critique. Stronger than its externalist counterpart, this type of critique avoids the charge of relativism that can be brought against social criticism that appeals to external values. Although the universal norms that external critique appeals to are independent of actual human thought and action, it is precisely for this reason that it is problematic. As Kauppinen (2002) suggests, value pluralism forces universalist principles to be explained in extremely general terms so as to remain culturally neutral and thus, they become

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increasingly difficult to turn to when making value judgments (pp. 481). As a result, external critique faces the problem of either being too broad and abstract for any practical use, or being so specific that the user is forced to appeal to principles that are culturally relative, thus succumbing to ethnocentrism.

It is for this reason that internal critique is such an attractive tool for engaging in moral criticism; it is able to pass moral judgments by referring to inherent contradictions within a system. Simple internal critique is the most straightforward: by drawing attention to the contradiction between explicitly stated parts of a system, one is able to judge the system or institution as being morally corrupt or hypocritical. Kauppinen engages in this type of critique using organizations such as the World Bank and IMF as examples. Their explicit purpose, he writes, “is to help bring wealth and well-being to developing nations, while their actual practices all too often lead to the opposite results” (2002, pp. 484). Thus, by showing how the explicitly stated goals of a system are inconsistent with its actions, one can engage in a simple internal critique of it.

More complicated is a second, reconstructive form of internal critique, which requires one to evaluate a system based on principles which are not explicitly demonstrated. One can infer these principles and attitudes, writes Kauppinen, from the ways in which they are manifest, which might include unarticulated emotions and informal sanctions or perhaps partial articulations of religious customs and laws (2002, pp. 484). It is a strong version of this reconstructive internal critique that he attributes to Honneth’s philosophy of recognition. Indeed, by recognizing a subject as someone deserving of autonomy, rights or social esteem, you are applying an implicit normative evaluative framework to them. If this implicit framework is violated, as might be the case if certain lifestyles or customs are looked down upon (or, using Honneth’s language, denied esteem), then an attempt at internal critique, and a struggle for recognition are justifiable.

But what can be said about the implicit normative standards of recognition? If Honneth’s theory of recognition is to serve as the measure for

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moral judgments, it must appeal to principles that are universally held. What he is attempting to achieve is what Kauppinen characterizes as *strong* reconstructive critique, which requires that the implicit norms of mutual recognition in humans ought to tacitly refer to universal standards of value (2002, pp. 485). Much like the difficulties encountered in universalist external critique, strong internal reconstructivism must refer to principles that are broad enough to account for moral pluralism. In *Grounding Recognition*, Honneth attempts to answer the challenge put forth by Kauppinen. That is, to “[demonstrate] that the norms of recognition that are reconstructed in each case are not of a merely contingent character but have, rather, *necessarily* universalistic content” (Honneth, 2002, pp. 515). Honneth’s key to this challenge lies in personal autonomy and self-realization.

### **The Normative Core of Recognition**

A brief examination of Honneth’s discussion of autonomy is necessary at this point. In *Redistribution as Recognition* (2003), Honneth rejects Nancy Fraser’s two-dimensional theory of recognition that holds parity of participation as its core. Her attempt at articulating a normative core for recognition holds that recognition claims are justified if they allow for increased participation in public life for an individual or group, without impinging on anyone else’s ability to do the same (Fraser, 2003, pp. 31). Honneth rightly criticizes this position as being culturally relativistic. Indeed, participation in public life is a virtue that has come to be held in high regard within liberal democracies in the West. It is uncertain whether parity of participation is valued as highly (or at all, for that matter) in other areas of the world. By adopting participatory parity as the normative core to her theory of recognition, Fraser is undertaking an ethnocentric external critique, though she believes it to be universalist.

Honneth, in turn, holds that autonomy and self-realization ought to be held as the normative core of recognition. He believes that this overcomes the difficulties that Fraser’s parity of participation encounters because self-

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realization draws its normativity from within the realm of recognition, thus being internalist. He writes,

What subjects can regard as dimensions of their personality for which they can legitimately expect social recognition at any given time depends on the normative mode of their inclusion into society [...] Thus, the corresponding social morality can also be understood as a normative articulation of the principles that govern the way subjects recognize each other in a given society. (Honneth, 2003, pp. 181)

Thus, rather than refer to an external principle such as parity of participation, Honneth holds self-realization as an internal normative principle, necessarily bound to recognition. The way in which we form our personal identity is derived from the relations of recognition that we experience. Accordingly, a social morality argues Honneth, is merely an articulation of the internal normative principles that we hold and employ when engaging in recognition relations.

I find this classification of self-realization as internal to be problematic however. By positing self-realization and autonomy as part of the recognition process, Honneth is entering into a form of question begging, where both recognition and self-realization are contingent upon one another. It appears as if he may be advocating a stance that self realization is formed through recognition, while simultaneously claiming that a social morality is an articulation of the mutual recognition of two parties' identities. If self-realization and autonomy are the goals of a struggle for recognition, then one might ask how it is that an individual can articulate their need for recognition if an autonomous image of the self – only achievable through recognition relations – is required to do so. If this is not the case, that recognition and self-realization are dependent upon one another, then Honneth has indeed escaped this criticism. However, it will require him to provide another explanation as to how autonomy and self-realization in recognition are capable of internal critique. In

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other words, if the end of self-realization is not accepted as normatively neutral on the grounds of its relation to the process of recognition, then he must show that it is universally normative in another way.

In *Grounding Recognition* (2002), Honneth articulates his position with this criticism in mind. His new stance considers a point made by Kauppinen, challenging the primacy of the norms of recognition. This challenge, writes Kauppinen, is “that the norms of recognition are *derivative* from more fundamental moral norms of self-realization, and these fundamental norms are relativistic, being specific to Western liberal societies that prize individual self-realization over other values” (2002, pp. 493). This challenge is similar to the one that Honneth has leveled against Fraser’s notion of parity of participation. Just as Honneth had accused participation in public life as being a culturally relativistic virtue, valued mainly by those in the liberal West, so too can it be argued that self-realization is relative, valued mainly by Western liberal societies, but not necessarily elsewhere.

Honneth’s clarification of his position takes two forms. First, in addressing the claim that the norms of recognition are derivative from the norms of self-realization, he rejects the charge of instrumentalism that Kauppinen levels against him. He writes, “It would be a mistake to follow Kauppinen in speaking of ‘recognition’ as merely secondary to a primary goal of ‘self-realization’; on the contrary, the point is that individuals’ autonomy can reach its *fullest development* only via the relevant recognitional responses” (2002, pp. 516). In other words, Honneth is claiming that self-realization is not the primary goal of recognition in an externalist sense. Rather, it is dependent on recognition, as individuals can only achieve full autonomy and self-realization through mutual recognition.

This claim is troublesome however, as I find it unreasonable to place the weight of self-realization entirely on recognition relations. One could imagine an individual who lives a life of solitude as being able to speak of himself as autonomous. Further, it is unfair to speak of such an individual as lacking altogether, or having a deficiently formed notion of self. Indeed, self-

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realization and autonomy can be developed through relations of recognition; however, recognition ought not to be considered a necessary condition for them, as Honneth believes. His talk about ‘full development’ of autonomy through recognition is vague, as he fails to clarify both what it means for one to be fully autonomous, and how recognition relations hold a monopoly on such development. Thus, his response to Kauppinen’s charge that relations of recognition are subservient to the normatively distinct and relativistic goal of self-realization is insufficient.

In a second attempt to address the charge that his conception of autonomy is relativistic, Honneth describes it as a more general principle, which he believes can be applied universally. He writes that a concept of autonomy or self-realization “should rather let differences come to the fore regarding the various cultural ways of realizing, within history, the *telos* of a relation-to-self that is free from domination or compulsion” (2002, pp. 517). In defining autonomy and self-recognition in these terms, he is taking a step back from his previous position which had been centered on the Western liberal conception of “the good life”. Indeed, by taking a more general approach to autonomy, Honneth has adopted a less relativistic stance. However, he has not been able to fully eliminate relativism from his position. His argument is that autonomy and self-realization are universal, insofar as they are to be considered as a sort of liberty for one to establish a relation-to-self free from domination. This notion retains, however, a relativistic aspect.

Consider the military as example. In such an institution, regulated by principles of strict discipline and obedience, autonomy and self-realization are not highly valued. If one were to pursue full autonomy within the military organization, as opposed to submitting and obeying orders from above, the entire chain of command would be undermined. If we imagine one who willfully enters the military - not through coercion or a draft – we could see that such an individual comes to form a conception of the self as a *direct result* of domination. It is possible in this sense to speak of a soldier who, in being recognized as a soldier, loses autonomy. In this case, identity is formed through

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relations that, under different circumstances, might intuitively be called misrecognition. Although one may argue that an exercise of autonomy was involved in the initial decision to enlist in the military, it cannot be doubted that identity formation and self-realization are brought about as a direct result of the domination and obedience required of soldiers. Thus, Honneth's claim that the norms of autonomy and self-realization are universalist is dubious; it is clear that self-realization and autonomy, although less relativistic than parity of participation, are principles that are more highly valued across cultural and demographic groups.

### **Historical Moral Progress as an External Evaluative Principle**

Up to this point, it has been argued that the normative core of Honneth's philosophy of recognition – autonomy and self-realization – fails to capture the universality required in order to undertake strong internal reconstructive critique. Indeed, his inability to provide universal norms has reduced his theory to a *weak* reconstructive internal critique, described by Kauppinen as relying on “norms that simply happen to structure the practices of a particular society” (2002, pp. 485). I shall now proceed to argue that Honneth's philosophy of recognition is not, in fact, a form of internal critique; rather, it points to external principles when making moral judgments.

A crucial aspect of Honneth's stance, which has yet to be discussed at this point, is the notion of moral progress. In another attempt to show the universality of the norms of recognition (those of self-realization and autonomy), Honneth argues that historical progress holds the key to solving the problem of relativism. A distinct feature of the norms of recognition, he writes, is that they contain a “normative surplus”<sup>1</sup>. He explains this concept in *Grounding Recognition* where he writes, “even when there is no apparent gap between the *de facto* practices and implicit norms, the ideals associated with the distinct forms of recognition always call for greater degrees of morally

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as “surplus of value” in *Redistribution as Recognition*.

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appropriate behavior, than is ever practiced in that particular reality” (2002, pp. 517). In other words, no matter how closely - or even ideally – a society conforms to its implicit norms, it always ought to be presupposed that a higher moral reality is achievable. In this sense, Honneth believes to have overcome the obstacle of historical relativism; the norms of recognition are not static, but rather, they evolve with history.

This way of viewing moral progress as an indicator of normative universality poses some concern however. Arguably, the classification of Honneth’s philosophy of recognition as internal critique is drawn into question. One is compelled to ask how a principle such as a future society functions as an internal norm of a system. By using a non-existent and hypothetical future reality as the yardstick for normative judgment of the current state of affairs, Honneth would appear to be appealing to external values.

It may be argued in Honneth’s defense though, that although the notion of a normatively superior future existence is indeed not an internal feature of a society, it holds internal manifestation through the potential inherent within humans or through a negation of the status quo. Honneth writes, “as a result of the corresponding recognitional responses of legal respect, of love, and of esteem, subjects come to be able to identify with the three evaluative qualities to which they always already *potentially* have access, independently of all historical transformations” (2002, pp. 512). It is indeed possible to say, as Honneth implies, that the notion of historical progress is the articulation of an internal drive to actualize potentialities. This appears to be a more accurate characterization of the ‘surplus of value’ idea; the value horizons of the norms of recognition contain within them a notion of value that transcends the status quo and posits a qualitatively superior society. He writes that the norms of recognition “continually demand, from within themselves, the further perfection of our moral action, such that the historical process is characterized by a permanent pressure to learn” (2002, pp. 517). This notion seems somewhat troubling, as it appears as if Honneth is attributing the desire for moral



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perfection and rationality as being inherent in all persons. This aside, there is a more important issue to be discussed.

Honneth claims to be able to avoid the criticism that historical moral progress is an external principle by conceiving of it as a potentiality inherent in individuals. Left at that, however, the ability to make moral judgments regarding the current state of affairs becomes difficult. Indeed, for Honneth's norms of recognition to be universal and thus allowing him to pursue a strong internal critique, they ought to be found in something more concrete than a hypothetical utopia. It is for this reason that he turns to the past when passing judgment on the norms of recognition. He writes, "in order to show that the currently dominant norms of recognition are not just relatively but rather universally valid, *it must be possible to assert their normative superiority over all previous recognition regimes*" (2002, pp. 517).

The necessity for one to use the past when evaluating the norms of recognition is troublesome. While Honneth has been able to argue that recognition holds within it a surplus of value that allows individuals to use the implicit norms to posit a better society, he is unable to take this approach here. A past 'recognition regime' has no manifestation in the current social state, as neither potentiality nor actuality. Likewise, determinate negation of the present can speculate on a hypothetical future society, however it does not identify the past norms recognition or state of affairs.

It is on this point, I believe, that Bartol and I differ somewhat. Though I acknowledge that a past recognition regime might indeed be manifest in a present society as an evolutionary prior value system out of which the current society has grown, the values themselves are not necessarily an internal feature of the present society. Bartol's example of the historical expansion of the concepts of personhood and legal recognition to include African Americans and Aborigines illuminates my point. If we consider our present day society, S2 to have a value system evolved from an earlier stage of society, S1, then even though we can argue that indeed, S1's value system has developed into that of S2, *the values themselves*, mainly, the historically prior conceptions of

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personhood and legal recognition are nowhere to be found among S2's current value set. Thus, in order for one to argue that a present society is morally superior due to its expansion of legal recognition and personhood to African Americans and Aborigines, we must necessarily appeal to the value system of the past, whose articulation lies outside of the current system.

The question we ought to ask then, is exactly what does a society's value system imply about the past? It is easy to say, as Bartol does, that the norms of the present can be considered to be an evolved form of the norms of the past, but the concern that I have is that the norms of the present provide no descriptive explanation as to their past nature. To illustrate this concept with a simple example following Bartol's theme, one can say of society's present value system that "Our present society grants legal recognition to all." Implicit in this statement is not "Our past society granted legal recognition to white people." In order to access this description of a past value system, one must turn to the value system of the past, which lies entirely outside of the current system, regardless of how clearly its evolutionary progress can be observed. Thus, in evaluating the present against the past, one is essentially appealing to a principle that exists as entirely external to the social system they seek to evaluate. Though I agree with Bartol insofar as I believe Recognition Theory to be an inadequate form of transhistorical critique, we differ in our methods of arriving at this conclusion. Whereas Bartol has convincingly shown the problems of historical moral progress in transcultural critique, I hold that *the very concept* of historical moral progress is inherently flawed due to its dependence on external principles and thus, is unable to stand alone as a method of internal critique.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

While both Honneth and Kauppinen characterize Honneth's philosophy of recognition as being an instance of strong reconstructive internal critique, I believe this categorization to be inaccurate. Autonomy and self-realization, which serve as the normative core of Honneth's Recognition Theory, are not the

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universal principles that he believes them to be. His claim that recognition is a necessary precondition for the development of full autonomy and self-realization is drawn into question when one considers the life of a hermit. Although he is not part of a legal system under which he can claim to have rights, surely it could be said that he is autonomous. Moreover, it is unreasonable to make the claim that he is unable to have a fully formed conception of himself, or that he is unable to undertake full self-realization. Additionally, when one considers the military institution as an example of a social construct that places limited value on autonomy and self-realization, these principles appear to be at least somewhat relativistic. Whereas Honneth describes self-relation as being the development of a relation-to-self free from domination or compulsion, a soldier's relation-to-self is precisely influenced by those principles of domination and compulsion. A soldier recognizes herself as an individual who submits to the will of the chain of command. This to me suggests that while Honneth has made a definite improvement over Fraser's parity of participation by positing autonomy and self-realization as the normative core of his philosophy of recognition, he still succumbs to relativism, albeit to a lesser extent.

Similarly, the characterization of Honneth's philosophy of recognition as being strong internal critique is questionable. Though it is possible to conceive of his notion of historical progress as being contained as a potentiality within the existing order, the turn to a past society as a means of evaluating the present is troublesome. By appealing to a past state of affairs as a method of determining the moral superiority of the present society, he is appealing to an external principle, as the norms of a past society are not necessarily implicit in the present. Thus, to use previous 'recognition regimes' as a yardstick by which we are to measure the present, we are in fact engaging in a form of external critique. Although Honneth has made explicit improvements upon Fraser's shortcomings, as well as useful revisions of his own theory, he has not eradicated the problem of relativism. I agree with Bartol when he suggests that

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his notion of historical moral progress must be abandoned in order for Recognition Theory to retain the character of internal critique. At best, I believe Honneth to be advocating a mildly relativistic hybrid criticism, which holds aspects of both internal and external critique.

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