Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Recognition

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Abstract: An application of the social theory of Axel Honneth to global justice, arguing that development goals must include provision for the intersubjective recognition required for identity formation. In the disciplines of Political Philosophy and International Relations cosmopolitanism is often defined as the view that all people, no matter their national, ethnic or religious backgrounds and no matter what their gender, have an equal moral status. The most telling enunciation of this view is the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the focus that is given to rights and a global form of legal equality by this document and by such theorists as John Rawls is not rich enough to capture all of the ethical demands that global society places upon well-to-do Westerners and developed nations. This paper makes use of a thesis by Axel Honneth to the effect that political thinking needs “a basic conceptual shift to the normative premises of a theory of recognition that locates the core of all experiences of injustice in the withdrawal of social recognition, in the phenomena of humiliation and disrespect.” Honneth identifies three spheres of recognition in modern societies: love, law, and achievement. I offer some exposition of his theory and then argue that global justice must be understood to embrace the substantive ethical values that arise in these three spheres as well as the procedural standards of moral rightness that belongs to the second of them. Such an expanded conception of global justice will yield an enriched conception of cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Identity, Recognition, Honneth, Global Justice, Development Ethics

Introduction

IN THIS PAPER I will argue that the cosmopolitan ideal – defined as the view that all people are of equal moral standing – can be read more broadly than the modern liberal insistence that everyone has the same fundamental rights. On the liberal view of justice, an injustice is understood as a violation of a right held by an individual person. Whether the right be the right to life, to subsistence or to property, any act which denies or takes away such a right – killing someone, letting them starve, or taking their land, for example – would be an act of injustice. Such acts would be injustices not only because they cause unjustifiable material harm to their victims – by taking their life, radically diminishing their life prospects or taking away their livelihood – but also because they are violations of the rights those individuals possess as rights bearers. This conception has been criticised as allowing little room for the harms that come from the systematic or occasional denigration that groups as such might suffer, and gives but little regard to the vulnerabilities of people that arise from the social – as opposed to political and economic – relationships in which they live their lives. Accordingly, if we could develop a concept of injustice which is broader than that of a violation of individual rights, we would have a concept which could be understood not only in modern liberal terms, but also, perhaps, in communitarian terms. If such a concept could indicate a bond between people richer than the reciprocal negative duty of not violating the rights of individuals but rather a bond marked by solidarity, then this concept would suggest a new conception of cosmopolitanism: no longer one of every individual having equal moral status, but of all individuals constituting a global community.

In order to provide a way into the problematic described above I will explore a thesis from the work of a German philosopher associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, Axel Honneth. Honneth has argued that political thinking needs “a basic conceptual shift to the normative premises of a theory of recognition that locates the core of all experiences of injustice in the withdrawal of social recognition, in the phenomena of humiliation and disrespect.” I will explicate this thesis and show how it can provide the richer concept of cosmopolitanism which I have indicated.

The theoretical basis for Honneth’s thesis derives from such varied sources as the political philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and the social psychology of George Herbert Mead (1863-1931). Hegel had argued that a person’s identity is formed in the context of the recognition that others – initially parents – give to that person, and Mead’s development psychology bears this out. Social psychology is rich with descriptions of how the identity of individuals is shaped by their upbringing and their social environments.

According to Honneth, the form of recognition that sustains us and grounds our development as children is that of love. From the point of view of the parent, what it is about the growing child that this love responds to is its need. Because the object of this relation of recognition is needful and the one who accords the recognition is the one who loves, the relationship of love is between the needs of one and the love of the other. So, for Honneth, love is a recognition of need which sustains the growth and development of the needy. The institutional or social framework in which this first level of recognition is manifest is that of the family or of whatever surrogate for the family the society provides. The benefit that flows to the child who is loved is not only physical sustenance but the kind of emotional support that allows it to grow in self-confidence. This in turn supports the sense of individual identity that emerges within a loving family and enlarges it as the child enters its supportive community. As Honneth puts it,

This fundamental level of emotional confidence – not only in the experience of needs and feelings, but also in their expression – which the intersubjective experience of love helps to bring about, constitutes the psychological preconditions for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect.

It is significant for my argument that the processes being described here are processes both of individuation and of insertion into a community. Love is an affect. It is an emotion and in most cases – especially as it relates to parenting – it is given unconditionally, unilaterally, and disinterestedly. The principle of reciprocity, so central to liberal thought, does not apply to love. A parent does not love her child provided the child loves her back or in order to gain an advantage for herself. As an emotion there is a degree of passivity to it in that it is elicited in the one who loves by the object of that love. It is seldom planned for or parcellled out in rationally delineated measures. In order to apply his concept more widely than the family, Honneth also highlights the concept of “care” and argues that even outside of the context of family relations there is a form of affective and practical recognition of the other in which the one who cares acknowledges the needs of the other and is moved by such emotions as compassion and solicitude to meet those needs in whatever way the situation might call for.

For Honneth one of the ways of distinguishing the sphere of love and caring from other moral spheres is by identifying the specific forms that injustice or the failure to meet the demands of this sphere might take. If the appropriate kind of recognition of a person at this level is to love that person or to care for them as the situation requires, the harm of not being accorded the appropriate recognition at the level of caring relationships between people is the harm of not being loved or cared for when one needs to be. This will take different forms in different contexts. For a very young child, being unloved and neglected can be literally fatal, but even in less dramatic cases it can leave psychological scars that last a lifetime. Feeling that one is not lovable or “dirty” or “cheap”, being unable to trust others or open out to them, or harbouring inchoate feelings of anger at rejection are all harms that can come from not being recognised at this level. The kinds of actions that evince a failure to accord recognition at this level range from parental neglect and bureaucratic heartlessness to torture and rape. If torture and rape seem conceptually far removed from parental neglect, the link that Honneth draws between them is that they both produce or exacerbate physical helplessness in their victims. The neglected child is helpless and is therefore unable to develop the kind of self-confidence that comes from being looked after physically and loved emotionally. Such a child is not able to see itself as valued or as being in possession of its own person in the world. The victim of torture or rape is made to feel that they have no control over their bodies. They suffer the ultimate humiliation of losing their bodily integrity and sense of self-control. This is a dire threat to that basic self-confidence that comes from being in possession of one’s own physical being. Despite the many differences between these two kinds of injustice, therefore, they are both failures to recognise the basic bodily needs of the

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victim: needs that would be met by love or by caring. As Honneth puts it, “The forms of practical maltreatment in which a person is forcefully deprived of any opportunity freely to dispose over his or her own body represent the most fundamental sort of personal degradation.”

Honneth’s thesis is that such actions result in injustice which consists in more than the material and physical harms that they inevitably cause. Rather, it is the injustice of personal degradation and of an attack upon the psychological bases of one’s self-confidence. It is the injustice of not being recognised as worthy of love and care. Moreover, this form of injustice has no culturally specific elements and is therefore universal. The damage to the sense of self, self-control and bodily integrity caused by it does not depend on culturally specific constructions of the self or of the self’s autonomy.

II

Honneth also draws from Hegel an account of a second level of social interaction marked by a new form of mutual recognition. This is the sphere of Law. The concept of law that is intended here makes connections between the moral law and civil law. The central idea is that any individual has a legal or moral status which is equal to that of any other individual in a given legal/moral framework. The principles of equality before the law and of impartiality in moral thinking are central to this outlook. This form of recognition arises from the faculty of reason more than from the emotions of love or care. From the perspective opened up in this new relational sphere of moral recognition, everyone is equal. The object of the relation of recognition at this level is the moral individual as a bearer of rights, and the one who accords the recognition is the moral agent who does what is right. The institutional or social framework within which this level of recognition is articulated is that of law. The sphere of modern law is one of equality of legal standing. It was when legal rights were uncoupled from any traditionally based status – whether inherited or purchased – that they became truly equal. This required a legal system with no exceptions or privileges not open to anyone under the jurisdiction of that system.

Honneth argues that this recognition of the rights of others has been driven, not by the imperatives that derive from pure reason as Kant had supposed, but by historical struggles in the West. These struggles have gone through three stages. First, in the period leading up to and including the eighteenth century there was the struggle for the civil rights of freedom against the inherited privileges and dispensations of the estates into which people were said to have been born. Second, coming to a head in the nineteenth century, there were struggles over rights of political participation such as the fight to extend suffrage. Third, highlighted in the twentieth century, there were struggles for social rights such as education and welfare. In each case, the impetus came from seeing that the rights being struggled for were necessary to secure the rights already won. So, for example education and welfare were seen as prerequisites for political participation, and political participation, in turn, was seen as necessary to secure and defend the civil rights that had been won in earlier struggles. What such struggles seek to achieve is that everyone in a given society recognises everyone else in that society as equally capable of making free and autonomous decisions in accordance with the moral ideas prevalent in that society. What is developed here is the sphere of liberty within which all persons can choose their own lives.

But this is not a sphere in which an individual is set free from the need for recognition from others. It is because people acknowledge one another as moral subjects capable of moral choices that they both accede to others the right to make such decisions and expect from them a reciprocal recognition of their own right to make them. “In obeying the law, legal subjects recognize each other as persons capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms.” To recognise a person in that way is to respect them, and knowing oneself to be recognised as a person “capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms” gives rise to an attitude of self-respect.

Notice that there is more at issue here than a purely legalistic or procedural affirmation of equality. Insofar as such an affirmation is based upon an attitude of respect for the capacity of each individual to make responsible decisions for themselves, there is also an affirmation of a conception of what constitutes a good human life. Such a life is one marked by the ability to make responsible decisions and by the recognition of that capacity on the part of others in a given community. Not only do we have here a reconciliation between the liberal ideal of autonomy and the communitarian ideal of mutuality, but also a reconciliation between a minimalist and procedural conception of justice and a more substantive conception alluding to an ideal of human goodness. It is on the basis of this ideal that both the mutual social recognition of respect and the individual’s capacity for self-respect are based.

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10 Ibid, 110.
Accordingly, the harm that people suffer who are not recognised at this level is the undermining of their sense of self-respect. It is a challenge to their sense of themselves as an autonomous agent and as a bearer of rights. There is an appreciable difference between the feeling that no one cares about one and the feeling that one has been taken advantage of. The crimes that can give rise to the latter feeling include deception, fraud, robbery, exploitation, enslavement and oppression. Once again, Honneth’s thesis is that, along with the material deprivations or injuries that might arise from such crimes, there is the injustice of not being recognised in the appropriate manner. To sum up:

Just as, in the case of love, children acquire, via the continuous experience of ‘maternal’ care, the basic self-confidence to assert their needs in an unforced manner, adult subjects acquire, via the experience of legal recognition, the possibility of seeing their actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy.\(^\text{11}\)

III

The third sphere of recognition that Honneth identifies is that of achievement. Everyone seeks to earn the respect and admiration of others through the things that they do and the kind of person that they are. When others accord them such respect and admiration they are recognising those achievements. This in turn provides encouragement and validation for the talents and achievements that that person has displayed. Societies depend for their progress and development upon the initiative and creativity of their members. In order to provide incentives for individuals to contribute their talents to the community, they must be accorded recognition in the form of praise, reward or acknowledgement. This recognition may take the form of monetary rewards, promotion, or other forms of social preferment. However, while such material rewards may be the concrete signifiers of the recognition, it is the recognition itself which is of greatest moment. Such social psychologists as Abraham Maslow have highlighted this need in us.\(^\text{12}\)

The desire for status and for the recognition of one’s achievements can be said to be ineliminable from human motivations and thus from human society. In contrast to the legal sphere in which everyone has equal status, this sphere is marked by stratification, hierarchy and even elitism. However, it remains a normative sphere in that there is a requirement that recognition, praise and other rewards should be accorded to all and only those who deserve them.

In traditional societies social status and esteem were tied to one’s position in society in a way that was relatively independent of one’s own personal achievements. If one was born into the nobility or if one joined the priesthood one was accorded social standing just by virtue of the position that one held. This was an ethos centred on honour rather than achievement. It depended upon a monolithic conception of which social achievements were worthwhile and this, in turn, is tied to a strong sense of attachment to community values on the part of members of the social group. Where group identity is dominant and honour sought, recognition of the achievements of group members would produce group pride and the mutual recognition of such achievements would produce a strong sense of community solidarity. It might be suggested that examples of such an ethos survive in modern societies in the form of allegiance to sporting clubs and also in the form of nationalism. In such contexts, individuals can feel self-esteem and pride to the extent that they identify with the achievements of the groups of which they see themselves as members.

In modern capitalist societies, in contrast, given a starting point of equal legal status and the social provision of a level playing field, esteem will be legitimately awarded on the basis of achievement and of one’s contribution to the common goals of the community. However, while modern capitalist culture accords esteem only to what is deemed to be a useful social achievement, there is no consensus as to what is to count as such achievement. Is the work of women in the home to be the basis of social esteem? Is entrepreneurial success such a basis? How will we measure sporting prowess against heroism in military enterprises? And which groups within society value some of these achievements and not others? For social esteem to be based on achievements, there must be a consensus on what achievements are to matter. But in the context of modern valuepluralism one cannot count on the recognition of one’s achievements on the part of others. Prestige arises from one’s contribution to publicly acknowledged goods but one might have to struggle to have the goods that one is striving for accepted as publicly valuable. For example, in a capitalist society where money is the measure of value, wealth is taken to be an indicator of worthwhile contributions. Accordingly, rightly or wrongly, the wealthy are admired by some irrespective of their actual achievements, while even successful artists are relatively devalued.

Given the uncertainties that attend social prestige, what is sought in modern societies is more individualised and takes the form of self-respect. In this context solidarity has less to do with group identific-

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid, 118.

ation and more to do with symmetrical relations of respect. If these relations cannot be based on a shared conception of what achievements are valuable in a situation of value pluralism, then they must reduce to the minimal standard of not being denigrated. Solidarity then consists in not being devalued on the basis of one’s difference. That is, it would consist merely in tolerance. Although recognition at this third level of status and esteem becomes fractured in modern pluralist societies, it can have an all-embracing scope in the negative form of tolerance for practices, achievements and values that do not offend against the requirements of recognition of the rights of others at the level of law.

The object of the relation of recognition at this third level is the social individual as a possessor of talents and abilities, and the one who accords the recognition is the individual or group which creates and sustains the prestige or honour which that individual is given. In this way the institutional or social frameworks through which this level of recognition is realised will include the relatively formal system of rewards given through wages and other forms of remuneration, and the relatively informal systems of differentiation of status and of social esteem which individuals or groups can achieve within a modern society.

The harm suffered by those who are not given the recognition that is their due at this level is a loss of their sense of self-worth. One will feel oneself as insignificant within the community and as having little or reduced worth in the eyes of others. This in turn will undermine one’s assurance that one has any worth. Once again, just how this will be different from the loss of self-confidence that comes from not being loved or the loss of a sense of dignity that comes from being exploited might be more difficult to articulate than Honneth allows, but his key point is that there is a form of injustice which consists in suffering this kind of psychological harm. The kinds of crimes that can give rise to this feeling, and which are thus offences against the demand that a community should accord recognition to achievement, include discourtesy, sexism, racism, the cult of celebrity, discrimination and stigmatization.

IV

The three spheres that Honneth has described, when taken together, constitute the scope of justice. There are not three kinds of justice. In each sphere justice consists in being recognised. Justice consists in obtaining what one needs in the context of love and care, being accorded equal treatment before the law, and being given social status in ways that one deserves. In each case, justice consists in being accorded the appropriate kind of recognition.

How the three spheres of recognition interact can be seen when we consider the notion of distributive justice. The social rewards just alluded to will largely take material forms, thereby linking the sphere of recognition of achievement to the issue of distributive justice. All other considerations aside, a distribution of material and social rewards will be just insofar as it is deserved by the contribution the recipient has been able to make to society through their talents and achievements. However, just what material and social rewards are deserved will be open to considerable contestation. Wages, salaries and executive pay packages are matters for constant negotiation and debate. Such debates are the sharp end of deeper debates about the nature and bases of distributive justice in modern societies. Overshadowing such debates, and standing as a constant horizon to them, is the legal/moral order in which everyone is deemed morally equal to everyone else. This framework provides a constant pressure towards egalitarianism in social and political struggles over distributive justice. Insofar as everyone is morally entitled to an equal opportunity to enter the competition for recognition based on achievement, so a minimum provision of social goods must be made in order to allow for a level playing field. Any stratification that results from differentiation in talents and achievements beyond this base level is desired and therefore just. But any differentiation or stratification that prevents an individual from having a fair opportunity to achieve would offend against the egalitarian principle of equal moral status and equality before the law and would therefore be unjust.

But there is a further horizon to these debates: namely, the level of recognition based on love. In an essay on Habermas, Honneth argues for the liberal principle that everyone in a given society should be enabled to participate in the public sphere of uncoerced discourse so as to secure their role in political will-formation and have their voice heard in debates over the distribution of social goods. However, every society contains people who by reason of age or disability are not able to make to society through their talents it is deserved by the contribution the recipient has been able to make to society through their talents and achievements. However, all other considerations aside, a distribution of material and social rewards will be just insofar as it is deserved by the contribution the recipient has been able to make to society through their talents and achievements. However, just what material and social rewards are deserved will be open to considerable contestation. Wages, salaries and executive pay packages are matters for constant negotiation and debate. Such debates are the sharp end of deeper debates about the nature and bases of distributive justice in modern societies. Overshadowing such debates, and standing as a constant horizon to them, is the legal/moral order in which everyone is deemed morally equal to everyone else. This framework provides a constant pressure towards egalitarianism in social and political struggles over distributive justice. Insofar as everyone is morally entitled to an equal opportunity to enter the competition for recognition based on achievement, so a minimum provision of social goods must be made in order to allow for a level playing field. Any stratification that results from differentiation in talents and achievements beyond this base level is desired and therefore just. But any differentiation or stratification that prevents an individual from having a fair opportunity to achieve would offend against the egalitarian principle of equal moral status and equality before the law and would therefore be unjust.

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social justice. It is necessary because of the liberal ideal that everyone should be able to participate politically and that anyone who cannot participate equally is owed assistance in order to help them do so. But anyone who can participate is not an appropriate object of caring. Caring is only appropriate as a unilateral giving of assistance and would be demeaning for anyone who did not need such assistance. As Honneth puts it:

The moment the other person is recognized as an equal being among all others – in that he or she is capable of participating in practical discourses – the unilateral relation of care must come to an end, for an attitude of benevolence is not permissible toward subjects who are able to articulate their beliefs and views publicly.\(^\text{13}\)

Honneth argues that the struggle for recognition is foundational and motivational for all other political struggles. Even if the announced objective of a social movement is fair distribution of social goods, what motivates the struggle is not merely an economic interest in redistribution but the sense of insult that accompanies the unfair system of distribution which is being opposed. I am reminded of the peasants in the barrios of Caracas under the rule of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who were interviewed in John Pilger’s film: The War on Democracy.\(^\text{14}\)

They appreciated the better economic deal they were getting under the new regime, but they were most impressed by the recognition they were accorded through local community democracies and educational opportunities. Previously their barrios had not even appeared on the city maps of Caracas, but now they were being helped to educate themselves and to take charge of their own communities. Another example occurred in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968 when Afro-American striking garbage workers carried placards that did not convey economic demands but simply stated, “I am a man”.

Honneth concludes that the struggle for recognition is basic and that identity politics and class conflict both get their impetus, and also their legitimacy, from this struggle. They get their impetus because the perceived refusal of recognition gives rise to anger, humiliation and resentment. But we need to be able to decide which claims for justice are legitimate through seeing what the motivational bases for them are. If it is not to be such morally inappropriate bases as anger, greed and envy, or the forms of resentment described by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler, we need to posit the ethically legitimate, necessary conditions for identity formation and social inclusion. Recognition is such a condition. Recognition is a substantial good because it is a prerequisite for psychological maturity, legal equality and social inclusion. These are substantial goods rather than procedural rights. In order to achieve autonomy as an individual, and in order to achieve admission into the community, an individual must be accepted into a system of recognition which operates at the three levels of love, law and esteem. Individualist and communitarian goals are combined here to form a motivational basis for social struggle and a rationale for the legitimacy of such struggle. As Honneth puts it:

What motivates individuals or social groups to call the prevailing social order into question and to engage in practical resistance is the moral conviction that, with respect to their own situations or particularities, the recognition principles considered legitimate are incorrectly or inadequately applied.\(^\text{15}\)

Recognition theory combines procedural concepts of the right with substantive conceptions of the good: namely the individuation of people and their inclusion into society. This constitutes what Honneth calls a “teleological liberalism”\(^\text{16}\) in which the values of individual freedom are combined with substantive goals of human psychological and social development. These values of individuation and social inclusion admit of both principles of equality and of differentiation of esteem. The three levels of recognition do not all reduce to equality, and love and esteem are not spheres of justice in which egalitarian recognition principles are appropriate.

As the phrase, “teleological liberalism”, might suggest, the structure of Honneth’s argument is Aristotelian. The value and normativity of recognition – the fact that a refusal of recognition is an injustice rather than just a misfortune – arise from recognition’s being a necessary condition for both individuation and social inclusion. Insofar as individuation and social inclusion are both necessary for a happy and fulfilled human life – a life marked by what Aristotle would call eudaimonia – so they are ethical goods, and any social action or circumstance that is necessary for their attainment becomes normative. To accord recognition in the spheres of love, law and esteem is an ethical demand, a moral duty and a re-


\(^{14}\) Details at http://www.johnpilger.com/


\(^{16}\) Ibid, 178.
quirement of justice. Everyone has a right to such recognition.

**Conclusion**

It follows from this argument that cosmopolitanism should not be thought of simply as espousing equal moral status before international law for all citizens of the world. It needs to be thought of in more substantive terms. By including the three levels of recognition that Honneth has identified, we can understand cosmopolitanism as the view that everyone in the world has a legitimate claim and expectation that they will be recognised as the three levels that Honneth has described: the levels of love, law and achievement. The more usual understanding of cosmopolitanism focuses almost exclusively on the second level. My richer understanding embraces the first and third as well. What such a richer conception of cosmopolitanism will bring to the discourse of global ethics is a widening of scope and a deeper understanding of what justice requires. It is arguable that the values of love, equality and achievement are of greater universal relevance than a discourse centred on rights in that they are the prerequisites for the solidarity that marks communities the world over. Moreover, this wider form of cosmopolitanism allows us to urge that a fuller range of human needs and capabilities be included in economic development goals and made the object of the care and political struggles of the world’s peoples. Further, by acknowledging the social and communitarian contexts in which people develop self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, and by noting the shared values which constitute such contexts, we can come closer to seeing the world as a community of peoples constituting a public discursive sphere rather than as an arena for individualist struggles over rights.

**About the Author**

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Stan van Hooft is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University in Australia. He is the author of *Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics*, (Niwot, University Press of Colorado, 1995) and numerous journal articles on moral philosophy, bioethics, business ethics, and on the nature of health and disease. He is also a co-author of *Facts and Values: An Introduction to Critical Thinking for Nurses*, (Sydney, MacLennan and Petty, 1995). His *Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources for Bioethics*, was published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New York) in 2004. Stan published two further books in 2006: *Caring about Health*, (Aldershot, Ashgate), and *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, (Chesham, Acumen Publishers). His current research centres on Global Ethics and the philosophy of Cosmopolitanism. He conducts Modern Socratic Dialogues in a variety of settings with professional groups, with the general public and with individuals.