

**Recognition**

by Cillian McBride

Key Concepts; Polity Press 2013, pbk £12.99, ISBN: 9780745648484, 184pp

by Noell Birondo

It is a personal matter, a point of autobiography, but it illustrates something that beats in the heart of Cillian McBride's compact and quietly ambitious book, that I cannot myself choose to value, that I cannot myself choose to *esteem*, racial or homophobic bigotry. Hence bigots cannot justifiably demand that I recognize the alleged value of their bigotry; nor can they demand such recognition from society more generally, esteem being tied in this way to sincere evaluation. Although a failure to obtain social recognition might result in a loss of *self-esteem* for some bigots, and although this would in a way be bad, this negative result would be, in another way, simply too bad for bigotry. What this suggests is that a failure to grant this type of recognition – what McBride calls 'esteem recognition' – does not, by itself, usher in considerations about *injustice*. But this line of reasoning also obviously has implications for thinking about the negative self-esteem that accrues to members of the very groups targeted by bigotry: If this line of reasoning is correct, then it turns out that a failure to esteem racial or sexual 'identity' does *not*, by itself, amount to an injustice. Considerations about justice enter only at a different level, with failures to grant – either in action or in overt expression – a different type of recognition: the recognition of Kantian respect.<sup>1</sup>

If previous discussions of the ethics and politics of recognition have failed to appreciate these conclusions, the explanation presumably lies in the fact that, at least according to McBride, there has been 'little detailed discussion of the relationship between justice and recognition,' even in the work of Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser (104).<sup>2</sup> McBride also thinks that previous discussions of recognition, especially in the work of Taylor and Honneth, exhibit a common defect: that such discussions have been 'decisively shaped' (6) by what McBride refers to as the 'recognition-deficit model.' This model sees the problem of 'misrecognition' as typically consisting of 'a relationship between someone who lacks recognition, claiming it from another who has the power to remedy this recognition deficit by granting the recognition which is sought' (6). The recognition-deficit model thus encourages us to think that satisfying ethical and political solutions in this area might require that both bigots, and the groups targeted

by them, receive the recognition (including even the esteem) that they seek; the model prompts us 'to think that our primary concern must be to rectify recognition deficits' (127). But for this reason the recognition-deficit model embodies two serious weaknesses.

Regarding the 'politics of recognition' – that strand of social thought associated with Taylor's famous essay on the topic – the recognition-deficit model underappreciates the importance of authority and power relations, overlooking or leaving unquestioned how inequalities of power can shape the desire for recognition in the first place. This antecedent desire presupposes the authority of the dominant group to confer esteem on the minority group. But this prior act of recognition 'is already a product of inequality,' McBride says, 'and the desire for recognition in effect cements one's subordination' to the dominant group (38). The second weakness is that the recognition-deficit model presents us as *passive* recipients of others' recognition, not as active beings who must first recognize for ourselves the *authority* of anyone whose opinions can, positively or negatively, genuinely weigh with us. Hence it is important 'not to allow ourselves to be so dazzled by the "dialogical" recognitive self that we end up surrendering individual agency to social recognition' (67).

What lies behind that last thought is the notion of a virtual moral community – the kind that shows up, for instance, in the Kantian contractualism of Rawls or Scanlon – and the *virtual* recognition that can underwrite, especially in oppressive circumstances, a defiant form of self-respect. Confronted with an actual public whose authority we do not recognize, we can 'appeal over their heads to the authority of a *virtual* public' (156). Appealing to this sort of virtual community can enable our continued agency in the face of 'misrecognition'. These considerations coalesce when McBride writes of self-esteem, as he had earlier written of self-respect, as follows: 'If self-esteem can be independent of social attitudes as indicated above,' he says,

then we are not *necessarily* harmed by expressions of disesteem if we can discount these as ill-informed or, perhaps, malicious. To be subject to such expressions may still be extremely unpleasant, of course, and it must be wrong to attempt to humiliate someone, but individual judgement can provide a valuable line of defence for the self against such attempts. ... As with the idea of a moral community, an appeal to 'virtual' recognition can provide a bulwark against bruising social encounters. (82)

Hence the recognition-deficit model shows its own philosophical deficiencies, failing to appreciate a better explanation of the struggle for social recognition, 'a problem of certain social groups having a recognition surplus, which can be converted into social power over others' (128). The discussion returns here to the issue of Kantian respect, emphasizing the 'justice-focused' approach advocated by McBride.

The book's final chapter reaches, as one might expect, a Hegelian climax. Here McBride sketches a third and 'more general' (148) sense of recognition than the two discussed previously, a sense of recognition different from respect or esteem. He proposes what he calls an 'interactive' account of recognition, one that aims to avoid the shortcomings that McBride sees in Honneth's 'developmental' view. McBride's account aims to combine – he says that it aims to 'square the circle between' – a 'Hegelian insistence on the social nature of human agency, and a Kantian insistence on the dignity of individual moral agents' (137).<sup>3</sup> It also aims to distinguish itself from Honneth's view by maintaining that our recognition-sensitivity is a 'basic aspect of social interaction, and of the daily *exercise* of individual agency, rather than of the way we come to achieve this competence' (138). The developmental view appears, at least to McBride, 'to treat recognition as a sort of scaffolding necessary to the construction of personhood,' something that becomes 'redundant once personhood has been achieved' (139).

It would be incredible, of course, for McBride to believe – and uncharitable for anyone to think he believes – that this slender book manages to supplant the last twenty years of contemporary work on the topic of recognition. Nevertheless, a question remains about the intended audience for this book, especially since the question appears not to be addressed explicitly by McBride. The book contributes to Polity's *Key Concepts* series, a series that aims to provide (so the Polity website says) 'concise and accessible textbooks exploring core concepts in the social sciences.'<sup>4</sup> But the more ambitious strains in McBride's book pull against that characterization. The book provides many helpful examples that would engage the interest of undergraduate students, from competition for esteem in Northern Ireland to the Confederate flag in the American south; but one can also imagine such students being misled by certain aspects of the book, not only by the references: 'Smith 2009,' for instance, being a reference to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It would also be helpful to see a developed explanation for how *Rousseau's* analysis of the problem of esteem and social distinction can have been 'largely neglected' (86) in contemporary work on recognition. Such claims can give readers the impression that the people engaged in such

contemporary work have perhaps never read, nor even heard of, other authors discussed by McBride such as Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu.

In expressing such reservations, I do not mean to downplay how much a newcomer to the contemporary work on recognition can learn, and how much I myself have learned, from McBride's helpful treatment of these issues. It is a good question, certainly, whether we really *can* insulate ourselves from the negative effects of something like bigotry: for instance from those jarring protests signs, directed against homosexuals, whose 'Christian' message often begins with the words, '*God hates...*' What remains clear, I believe, is that the multi-layered ignorance displayed in these expressions, in the damning taunts and slogans, in their hatred, would certainly itself be difficult to undervalue, impossible to underesteem.<sup>5</sup>

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kantian respect features as the second of the three sorts of recognition that McBride highlights for discussion in this book. The third sort of recognition is not, however, as some readers might expect, the third sort of recognition invoked by Honneth in his own discussion of these issues: the recognition of love. McBride pays relatively little attention to love as a mode of recognition, emphasizing instead the tension between, and the mutual importance of, respect and esteem in developing a proper conception of social justice. He says that, 'a just society would, in a sense, keep respect and esteem in tension with one another' (127).

<sup>2</sup> There are many similar claims throughout this short book – certainly more than one could count on one hand – claims about the issues or observations that McBride thinks are 'surprisingly' neglected in contemporary work on recognition. Those with greater familiarity than I have of this literature can determine for themselves the appropriateness of such claims, themselves surprising.

<sup>3</sup> In the note that accompanies the text on p. 154, a few pages on from the passage I have just quoted, McBride says that: 'Here I am obviously following Pinkard's explicitly normative reading of the *Phenomenology* (1994),

which contrasts sharply with Honneth's view that the mature Hegel essentially neglected the intersubjective insights of his early writings' (ch. 5, n. 4). (See also 'Introduction,' n. 2.)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.polity.co.uk/keyconcepts/>

<sup>5</sup> Thanks are due to Greg Gietzen and Benjamin Porter, two of the current philosophy students at Wichita State University, for helpful discussion of the issues addressed in this review.