

Did the Greeks Have a Concept of Recognition?

Jonathan Fine

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

for *The Philosophy of Recognition*, eds. Thomas Kurana and Matthew Congdon Routledge:
Rewriting the History of Philosophy

[Please do not circulate or cite without author's permission]

Abstract: According to a prominent narrative, recognition is a modern problem, precluded by premodern notions of honor. This chapter invites us to reconsider this narrative by looking back to struggles over honor in ancient Greek thought. Already in Homer, the concept of honor embodies norms of mutual respect for peers and esteem for individual virtue and admits of contestation. Plato attempts to displace the Homeric view of honor while offering a competing philosophical view of honor and its value. By examining the status in both views of the human desire for admiration, this chapter shows the structure and ethical psychology of ancient Greek honor to be more complex and more continuous with theories of recognition than is often appreciated. These continuities offer fresh perspectives on ancient Greek honor and less familiar aspects of recognition.

1. Narratives of Recognition

The theory of recognition is not a stranger to its history. Recent efforts to illuminate how interpersonal relations of respect, esteem, and love are matters of justice have drawn from a German idealist conviction that one cannot realize who one is or become fully free without the positive regard – recognition – of others. These links between justice, freedom, and recognition depend on a distinctively social and distinctly modern conception of the self, as Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth emphasize in their landmark studies (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1995). The demand for respect, as in civil rights movements, presupposes a notion of human equality connected to moralized concepts of human rights and dignity. The demand for esteem, as in movements of solidarity among minority groups, presupposes a notion of individuality connected to concepts of authenticity and intersubjectivity. Both notions are often traced to a line of thought running from

Rousseau through Fichte to Hegel. However, as the nature and theoretical significance of recognition remain much debated, so too does the history of the concept. These historical and systematic issues are intertwined, for if other figures furnish fresh theoretical resources, it is not merely of historical significance whether or how earlier figures, such as Luther, Machiavelli, or Hobbes, contribute to the rise of this whole problematic. Unsurprisingly, the genealogy has primarily focused on early modern thought, for then arises a constellation of moral and political ideals we still struggle to achieve.¹

The question of my title may therefore appear idle. Did ancient Greeks have a concept of recognition? The most prominent narrative suggests not. No one denies, of course, that ancient Greek citizens vie for esteem and ancient Greek thinkers reflect with great sensitivity on the psychology and ethics of this desire. Ancient Greeks need no reminder that who we are depends on relations to others, as do certain modern thinkers following Descartes. Yet precisely this innocence might seem to indicate a lack of the concept of recognition. “In premodern times,” Taylor writes, people understand themselves in terms of honor and so recognition is “too unproblematic to be thematized as such” (1994, 35). On this view, shared in broad strokes by Honneth, honor is a matter of social rank. It structures inequality among groups, not respect for human equality, and defines people and their worth by their group role, not by their individual attributes. Because this social order is relatively stable, honor is largely uncontested and there is little cause to demand recognition; the problem does not arise. When the *ancien régime* collapses across modern Europe, however, honor becomes universalized into a concept of dignity, and it becomes possible and necessary to seek esteem for character and conduct by which one distinguishes oneself from other human beings. With these two shifts, the concept of recognition emerges out of and in opposition to the concept of honor. Modern recognition renders ancient honor obsolete (Taylor 1994, 27–35; Honneth 1995, 122–28).²

If this narrative suggests ancient Greeks lack a concept of recognition, the suggestion remains ambiguous. Not only is the narrative silent on antiquity, but we ourselves hardly have a single, settled concept of recognition (Honneth 2021). That the concept is contested makes genealogy necessary. But the twofold role of honor in the story above leaves unclear whether to speak of recognition only in modernity or whether honor constitutes a concept of recognition, if in some

implicit or attenuated form. There are challenging questions in this terrain about how best to illuminate the contrasts and the continuities among conceptual frameworks, what it takes to possess a concept, and what it takes for different cultures to possess the *same* concept, not just similar ones. I should like to set these questions largely to one side. But two preliminary observations are worth making.

First, the grand scope of the narrative, though illuminating, does not pretend to provide a fine-grained account of honor and its conceptual transformation. If only to solicit more detail, it is not idle to ask how ancient Greek honor relates to paradigms of recognition. Second, either interpretation of the narrative assumes that honor is unlike and normatively inferior to modern forms of recognition. This assumption is questionable, however. It has recently been argued on historical and philosophical grounds, on the one hand, that the concept of dignity bears the impress of earlier notions of honor and, on the other hand, that honor itself admits of more egalitarian, more conflictual, and more ethically robust forms than is often appreciated.³ These arguments qualify the history of (modern) recognition and offer perspectives on honor that remain little explored by theorists of recognition and classical scholars. My title question therefore has a dialectical purpose. By reexamining ancient Greek honor in view of recognition, we may illuminate not only this important aspect of ancient Greek ethics but also further aspects of recognition. For this reason, it seems fruitful simply to pose – if not necessarily to answer – the question whether ancient Greeks have a concept of recognition.

To begin to address these issues, I shall concentrate in what follows on two rival ancient Greek views of honor, one Homeric, the other Platonic. Both views, I shall propose, show the structure and ethical psychology of honor to be more complex and more continuous with the discourse of recognition than has been appreciated. As my approach must be selective, I shall examine two exemplary contests over the terms of honor. I shall present the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon in the *Iliad* to argue that Homeric honor embodies a norm of mutual recognition (Section 2). I shall then examine how Plato criticizes yet appropriates the Homeric view to reconceive honor (Section 3). I shall close by returning to the contemporary import of this historical analysis (Section 4).

2. The Homeric View

In Homer, honor (*timē*) is one's value or worth and the recognition of one's worth by others.⁴ These facets are intertwined because honor is necessarily social: one cannot have honor alone. It is, firstly, relational and hierarchical. Those with honor have a special status as members of a group; not everyone can enjoy this status. Secondly, one's worth is a function of what one contributes, or can be expected to contribute, to a group. Thirdly, this contribution must be recognized *by* the group. Whether one has honor, and how much honor one has, depends in part on receiving respect or esteem from others. These social dimensions of honor are clearest where honor is based on social status. A king, for example Agamemnon, has honor by virtue of rank. Yet one cannot be a king without ruling over others and being treated by them as a king. Such treatment in Homer is thoroughly normative. A king is *entitled* to honor from his inferiors; inferiors are *obligated* to honor their superiors, just as all human beings are obligated to honor the gods and their priests. Honor is also owed to suppliants or beggars who may be inferior. But the most critical obligation is that all warriors honor one another insofar as they are members of the same cooperative group. Such 'horizontal' honor, in Frank Stewart Henderson's terms, constitutes a baseline of equality upon which warriors compete for 'vertical' honor, a greater share of honor than others according to their individual worth (Stewart 1994, ch. 4). The crucial question, of course, is what the standard of worth is. As we shall see, the Homeric concept of honor involves *conflicting* standards of worth that generate 'struggles for honor.' I would like to show that these struggles betray a normative pattern of mutual recognition in which one understands oneself and one's worth in relation to the positive regard of others.

Formally, the pattern of reasoning is that if a hero A desires honor from another (B), then A presupposes (1) his own worth and (2) B's worth, otherwise B will lack the authority needed to satisfy A's desire; but B can have worth only if he also recognizes (3) his own worth and (4) A's worth. This pattern remains entirely implicit in the epics; it is simply embedded in practices of honoring. But it becomes apparent when ethical norms of honor are violated: when a warrior is dishonored, angered at this indignity, and demands justice. Fortunately, we need not look far for such scenes. As soon as the *Iliad* begins, Agamemnon dishonors Achilles by threatening to take his prized war captive, the young woman Briseis. This quarrel has become so familiar, though,

that it is easy to miss the complexity of the concept at its heart. A close look will allow us to untangle some of its strands and to set the stage for Plato's response.

We enter onto a tense conflict. Agamemnon, king of the Achaean army, has dishonored a priest of Apollo by refusing ransom for his daughter (*ētīmasen*, *Il.* 1. 11, 94). His men plead that the priest be respected (*aidesthai*, 23); Agamemnon does not yield. Apollo sends a plague and he relents, but in return he seeks an equal prize. Agamemnon threatens to take a prized woman from Achilles or another high-ranking warrior. The trouble is that, while a king deserves no less honor than his inferiors, to deny a warrior his fair share is to dishonor him. Moved by principle as well as personal offence, Achilles objects that Agamemnon thinks kingship entitles him to whatever he wants, failing to recognize the worth of others. The objection begins precisely: Agamemnon is shameless, without *aidōs*, and focused on profit (*kerdos*, 149).

To claim that Agamemnon lacks *aidōs* is to claim that he lacks a *sense of honor*, a commitment to shared norms of what is honorable.⁵ Someone with a sense of honor wants not merely to receive honors, such as booty, but to be *worthy* of honor or admiration. This entails being worthy in 'one's own eyes,' as it were, but also in the eyes of others, at least those whom one respects; and if one respects others, one must care about their worth as well as one's own. This train of thought underpins two related uses of *aidōs* in Homer. The first denotes shame at the thought of doing something ugly and thus shameful (*aischros*, *aischos*), as opposed to beautiful and thus admirable (*kalos*). The fundamentally aesthetic nature of the values in ancient Greek shame reflects the fact that shame concerns not only one's ethical commitments but also how one would *look* to others, real or imagined. These two faces of shame can come apart, but when shame is properly formed, they are inseparable: shameful actions by definition warrant others' indignation (*nemesis*) and bring dishonor to oneself. It was once assumed, on grounds of Kantian autonomy, that such reliance on others' opinions makes ancient Greek ethics immature in comparison to modern morality, with its internal sanctions of guilt and individual conscience. As Bernard Williams (1993) and Douglas Cairns (1993, 2011) have shown, however, this view misunderstands both ancient Greek shame and the social mediation of ethical life.⁶ When Hector feels shame after failing to protect the Trojans, he imagines how others would reproach him and, by his own standards, rightly so: his reckless pursuit of glory has endangered his people (*Il.* 22. 99–110). We

might say a sense of honor is bidirectional, concerned with one's own worth and others' recognition of it. And when Cairns draws the insight that "self-esteem depends on the esteem of others" (2011, 38), we do well to hear a familiar Hegelian criticism of Kant that has powered contemporary theory of recognition. What may be less familiar to contemporary ears is this positive ethical role for shame.

But the fact that a sense of honor is bidirectional does not itself imply that recognition should be reciprocal. To take this additional step, we must observe a second, related use of *aidōs*. To feel *aidōs* (*aideomai*) for a person or a god just is to honor them or, we may say, to *respect* them. This second use is internally related to the first by an assumption that someone with a sense of honor would refrain out of shame from disrespecting others. Respect here should not be mistaken for a specifically *moral* attitude, a response, say, to the equal dignity of all human beings. This much the progressivist narrative, whether Kantian or Hegelian, gets deeply right. Yet the notion of respect is entirely appropriate to the way attitudes of honor defer to and limit one's conduct in response to the normative status of others.⁷ This is what Agamemnon has failed to do and why he allegedly lacks *aidōs*. If Agamemnon had a sense of honor, and cared about his own worth, he would care to recognize the worth of others and to earn their recognition. The objection, then, is that Agamemnon does not give to others the same regard he desires from them and does not appreciate that they regard themselves the same way he regards himself. He violates the norm that honor should be not only bidirectional but reciprocal.

The same objection might seem to apply to Achilles. If he had a sense of honor, he would respect the status of a king, not insult his superior, and cede his prize. However, matters are more complicated. If honor depends on the positive evaluations of others, then one must show one is honorable by responding to disrespect in a public way. Aristotle simply presumes this public response when he characterizes anger in the context of honor by a desire for "*apparent* revenge" (*timōrias phainomenēs*) on account of "an *apparent* slight" (*phainomenēn oligōrian*) against oneself or one's relations (*Rhet.* II.2, 1378a31–33).⁸ The underlying point is plainer from the agent's perspective on herself: whether someone is honored or dishonored is proportional to her sense of her own worth.⁹ Accordingly, someone with a sense of honor *should* be indignant if their worth is not duly recognized. If Achilles were to stand to be "dishonored" (*atimos*, *Il.* 1. 171) –

treated, in his famous phrase, like a “worthless [*atimēton*] refugee” (9. 648, 16. 59) – then he *would* be a “nobody” (1. 231, 293), as Aristotle himself observes in quoting Achilles (*Rhet.* II.2, 1378b29–35). Moreover, and more significantly, Achilles’ objection does not simply pit the equality of horizontal honor against the inequality of vertical honor owed a king. It is that honor is based also on virtue or excellence (*aretē*), not just social status. These two standards of worth are often complementary, but they can and here do conflict. And despite what wise Nestor hopes (*Il.* 1. 275–81), these competing standards may not be fully reconcilable (Cairns 1993, 98–101; 2011, 31–4).¹⁰ In turn, honor is far more contestable than the traditional narrative of the rise of recognition assumes.¹¹

Two dimensions of virtue matter to Achilles’ argument. First, Achilles is the most courageous and skilled in battle, a large part for Homeric heroes of what it is to excel as a human being. To recognize this achievement is to give esteem, not respect. Certainly, Achilles wants greater esteem; he needs it to be the person he is. This is a psychological necessity, a matter of what Achilles and many human beings inescapably desire. But it is also a conceptual necessity, a matter of the fact that worth in honor is relational. Just as a king needs subjects, ‘the best of the Achaeans’ must excel over others; just as one cannot be a king without subjects’ respect, one cannot be the ‘best of the Achaeans’ without them thinking as much, without wide esteem and glory.¹² Still, how we should interpret Achilles’ desire for greater esteem is delicate. He might seem to think himself Agamemnon’s equal or superior when he observes that, although he does the hard work, Agamemnon always receives the greater share of booty and he “some small but dear thing” (*Il.* 1. 165–67).¹³ However, Achilles never denies that kingship merits honor nor claims he deserves a reward equal or greater to the king. It is significant to his argument that he appears content with the usual distribution; however small, his reward is ‘dear’ to him. For his argument turns on a second virtue of character, generosity.

The crucial claim is that Achilles has, and Agamemnon has not, followed shared norms of reciprocal generosity. If virtue demands competitive displays of courage in battle, the scene of one’s ‘besting’ (*aristeia*, cognate with *aretē*), it also demands cooperative efforts with peers, family, and friends, as Hector’s shame illustrates. In particular, warrior-chieftains are supposed to give generously to one another without obligating anything specific in return. The model of

exchange is gift-giving or hospitality (*xenia*), rather than transaction, debt payment, or *quid pro quo* agreement (Donlan 1982; Gill 1996, 133–41). Thus, Achilles frames his outsized contribution as a “favor” (*charis*) to Agamemnon, risking his life for the honor of the king and his brother Menelaus after Paris abducted Helen, Menelaus’s wife (*Il.* 1. 157–60). When Achilles observes that his prize is never equal to Agamemnon’s, his point is to emphasize that, notwithstanding his distinctive merit, he has generously rewarded Agamemnon and, perhaps, accepted less than he deserves. The ethical norms of the community lead him to expect, not a specific reward, but a similar display of generosity in return. Yet now, as soon as Agamemnon feels he has less than he deserves, he seeks compensation, no matter the worth and generosity of others. As Achilles later states, from Agamemnon “there has been no gratitude [*charis*] in return” (9. 316). Not only, then, does Agamemnon ignore that virtue, like social status, merits honor; he ignores that the value of honor is quite distinct from the exchange value of material goods. Hence, Agamemnon is not merely shameless but focused on profit. Achilles cannot fight for a man who, preoccupied by “wealth” and “luxury” (1. 171), fails to respect his status, esteem his virtue, and reciprocate his generosity. And so, after some escalation, Achilles withdraws to his ships.

The charge of profit-seeking depends upon an analytical distinction between honor itself and material tokens of honor. This distinction is analytical because in many cases respect and esteem are in fact expressed through tokens of honor (‘honors,’ *timai*) or rewards (*gera*), including booty, choice cuts of meat, full cups of wine, and athletic prizes. The intimate relationship between a material thing and the honor it symbolizes is significant. Material tokens make conspicuous *that* one is being honored, which is no small part of actually being honored. This conspicuous quality is evident in the greatest of prizes, the glory (*kleos*) through which one’s identity and virtuous deeds are immortalized in song. When Pindar calls his beautiful poetry a “mirror for beautiful deeds [*ergois kalois*]” (*Nem.* 7.14), his mimetic logic echoes the Homeric idea that glory falls to the young hero who dies in battle and, though dead, “still all that shows about him is beautiful” (*panta de kala... phanēē, Il.* 22. 73).¹⁴ The spectacle of the ‘beautiful death’ matches the aural beauty of poetry that signals an outstanding life. Nonetheless, the distinction between honor and its material tokens is significant for two reasons. First, honor is irreducible to material goods. As we have seen, it takes non-material forms, for example in admiration, care for friends, and modes of deference. These non-material forms imply that, while not everyone can have honor, acquiring

honor is not always the ‘zero-sum’ competition it is often taken to be (Cairns 1993, 94 n141). Moreover, material goods count as honors only if they express and are taken to express the right evaluative attitudes. Second, if honor is attitude-dependent in this way, it is possible to view conventional material expressions of honor as mere material things without value, or the relevant kind of value, depending on who gives them and under what circumstances. This is to take what might be called a *deflationary view of honor*. One extreme form is the Stoic doctrine, for very special reasons, that honor is not a good: its possession or lack does not affect whether one lives well or poorly. How far does this view extend in Homer?

This question is forced by the perspective on honor represented at *Iliad* 9 when Achilles rejects compensatory gifts from Agamemnon’s embassy. After Achilles complains that he has received no gratitude (*charis*), he continues:

There is an equal lot [*moira*] for the man who stays back and the man who fights hard.

We are all held in one honor [*timē*], coward and brave alike:

A do-nothing dies just the same as a man who does much.

(*Il.* 9. 317–20; trans. Lattimore modified)

These lines, like Achilles’ rejection of the embassy, are often taken to reject the Homeric system of honor.¹⁵ On this reading, Achilles’ reasoning might seem to run as follows: all human beings receive the same honor, their lot in life, namely death; and if that is the case, then (a) distinctions in honor are baseless, not based on distinctions in virtue, and (b) honor comes only from the gods, not members of a community. This reading draws support from the fact that Achilles proceeds to question the reasons for the Trojan war (337–41), declares his life worth more than any number of gifts that Agamemnon could give (379–409), and claims he does not need gifts to increase his honor from the Achaeans because he already has the honor of Zeus (608–10). This last might seem to suggest that the only audience whose recognition matters is a supreme god, not members of his community. Still more striking is Achilles’ suggestion that he and his fellow warriors have a ‘choice’ whether to die in battle with glory or to return home to a long, inglorious life (410–20). If these options are equally choice-worthy, then the value of honor has become radically deflated,

indeed. Achilles seems alienated from his ethical world and, this reading continues, only after a savage rampage does he regain his capacity for pity and become reintegrated in *Iliad* 24.

However, Achilles' stance is intelligible only in terms of a sustained commitment to the usual norms of honor (Gill 1996, 138–47). The rejection of the embassy is not a rejection of those norms but of Agamemnon's standing to honor: *his* gifts are worthless, claims Achilles. One indication of this more circumscribed position is that Achilles remains angry at Agamemnon's offence (*Il.* 9. 312–13, 344–45, 367–78, 645–47), rather unlike the proto-Stoic rational perspective that Chrysippus found in the hero.¹⁶ The reason why he holds onto his anger can only be his belief, still, that Agamemnon has no sense of honor. Agamemnon has promised – not, mind you, to Achilles directly – an incredible array of gifts, including his daughter in marriage, *if* Achilles gives up his anger (260–99). But Achilles has no reason to believe the gifts express the right attitudes, so no reason to give up his anger. Before Agamemnon grossly violated norms of reciprocity. Now, Achilles understands, he is offering an overabundance of gifts to assert his superiority as king (379–400).¹⁷

It is in the context of Agamemnon's disesteem that we must place Achilles' remark that everyone is held in the same honor. The reasoning is that, since the king shows no gratitude, brave fighters happen to receive no more honor than cowards, and both will die without. It is not that distinctions in honor are baseless, but that distinctions in virtue are not being recognized. Nor is it implied that honor comes only from the gods. The 'honor of Zeus' that Achilles claims for himself is not some private relationship with the divine unmediated by public forms of recognition. It is the obvious, publicly observable proof of his worth in what has come to pass, the fact that Achaeans are dying in his absence, as the context makes clear (cf. 1. 352–56, 508–10; 9. 118). By the same token, however, Achilles' absence means he is failing to protect his friends and reciprocate the honor they have given him, as Ajax points out (*etiomen*, 9. 631; *aidessai*, 640). This criticism moves Achilles enough that he decides to stay at Troy rather than return home (650–55). Clearly, then, Achilles has not rejected the Homeric view of honor. His extreme position demonstrates its complexity and internal tensions.

The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon has revealed four strands in the Homeric view of honor. First, honor comprises one's worth and its recognition by others based on shared norms of what is admirable as opposed to shameful. These norms require reciprocal respect among peers and esteem for virtuous character and conduct. Second, these standards of worth – social status and virtue – can conflict. Third, the material expression of honor generates a problem of distinguishing an ethically necessary desire for honor from a vulgar desire for material goods. Fourth, there is already in Homer the suggestion that the desire for honor must be controlled to avoid political and personal disintegration. Plato will pull on each of these strands to construct a rival view of honor and its role in a good human life.

3. A Platonic Revaluation

It is well-known that Plato is critical of Homeric values, which remain influential, with some transformations, at classical Athens. His criticism is powerful enough that it can seem as though Plato dismisses honor as a trivial pursuit or, worse, and corrupting one. But on closer inspection we find across several dialogues a more multifaceted critique and, with the battlelines of the debate in view, a more positive proposal in Plato's fullest reflection on honor in the *Republic*. Very roughly, we might identify four strands in response to the Homeric view. The first challenges the assumption that worth is wholly constituted by evaluative attitudes within a community. Plato agrees that honor is a measure of one's worth and, as a relational notion, this worth must be recognized. But he thinks there are facts about worth, based upon an independent standard of beauty (*to kalon*), to which social patterns of esteem are answerable. The ethical task is to inquire into and to understand the nature of this value and others, which correlate in the *Republic* to the metaphysics of 'forms.' This metaphysical hypothesis, second, dissociates honor (as well as virtue) from aristocratic social status, a conceptual shift already underway with the rise of Athenian democracy. At the same time, third, Plato sometimes associates honor with money and bodily goods rather than virtue, exploiting the tension presented by Agamemnon. However, we should not conclude that Plato dissociates honor from virtue or adopts the deflationary view on which honor is not a distinct good. These more reductive moments, I shall suggest, form the destructive side of an overall more constructive attempt to *redefine* and *revalue* honor in support of a philosophical life. Both sides of this project are clearest in a fourth strand, in which Plato stresses the need, embodied by Achilles, to subordinate honor to virtue and 'spirited' desire for honor to

rational desires. I shall therefore focus on how the ethical psychology of spirit contends with the Homeric view of honor while retaining a central role for recognition.

The key psychological element for present purposes is spirit (*thumos*, *to thumoeides*), a distinct source of motivation alongside appetites and reason. Appetites seek bodily pleasures. Reason wants to know the good and to rule in light of that knowledge. Spirit is characterized by love of honor (*philotimia*) and love of victory insofar as these appear beautiful (*kalon*).¹⁸ As in Homer, spirit is the seat of social and self-directed emotions involved in honor, including shame, pride, and anger at perceived injustice, especially perceived disrespect (440cd, 549d, 550b, 560a, 563d, 568e).¹⁹ These are bellicose tendencies, but they are malleable and must be cultivated to support rational rule in the soul against the excesses of the appetites, just as in the ideal city spirited auxiliaries must support rational rule of the guardians against foreign and domestic enemies. If spirit seems suspiciously to fit the dialogue's famous city-soul analogy, recent scholars have shown that this element is well-motivated. According to Angela Hobbs, through spirit Plato theorizes the human "need to believe that one counts for something," the tendency "to form an ideal image of oneself" that is shaped by and needs "social recognition" (2000, 30). While Hobbs draws modern parallels to Nietzsche, Freud, and Adler rather than the theory of recognition, it is difficult not to hear in her terms a tantalizing reference to Rousseau's *amour propre*, a desire for esteem that, too, drives one "to count for something," in one common translation.²⁰ And like Rousseau, Plato worries that his culture misshapes one's desires for admiration and capacities to perceive and appreciate genuine virtue. For if one admires a hero like Achilles, one will mistake honor and glory for the greatest of goods and strive to be admired for what parades as the beauty of virtue.

The lover of honor (*philotimos*), a figure like Achilles ruled by spirit, exemplifies the harm of mistaking honor for the good (*Rep.* 548e–551a). This is someone who, without the right cultural and physical education, conflates excelling over others with dominating others by force. He is sensitive to what others admire, as anyone with a sense of honor must be, but his culture corrupts his sense of honor. The lover of honor comes to find admirable whatever is admired; where wealth is prized, honor accrues to money, for example. This diagnosis assumes that one tends to admire and emulate what others admire, such that dominant cultural values are reinforced (550e). Insofar

as this social psychology embodies a desire for recognition, Plato is aware that dynamics of recognition can prevent rather than promote virtue and happiness. This is why education in the *Republic* begins by changing the material and symbolic culture, not least Homeric poetry, which deeply shapes who one admires and aspires to become. The aim is to redirect the social psychology of spirit around genuine beauty (401b-402a).²¹ Interestingly, this solution does not dispense with the Homeric framework.²²

This point is not obvious. Plato has Socrates disgrace Achilles so thoroughly at *Rep.* III, as Hobbs has detailed, that his debt to Homer is easily obscured.²³ The general criticism is that Achilles lacks self-control. Obviously, he is arrogant; Socrates need only quote one line of the insult to Agamemnon (*Il.* 1. 225, *Rep.* 389e). But another charge is more distortive: Achilles is a money-lover who would accept Agamemnon's gifts or return Hector's corpse only for a "ransom" (390e). The word is *timē*. Socrates exploits its sense of 'price' and its often-material expression to turn Achilles' criticism of Agamemnon against himself and, as I intimated, to associate honor with money (cf. 371e, 434ab, 568d). Both ontologically depend on beliefs and attitudes in a social world, which may explain why the *Phaedo* links love of money and love of honor together with the body as opposed to the soul (*Phd.* 64de, 68bc). The psychology of the *Republic* is different. But does its presentation of Achilles imply the same low view of honor?

One penetrating account of spirit suggests so. According to Tad Brennan (2012, 108–12), spirit pursues honor but cannot grasp what honor is: for Plato, honor just is a complex system for the distribution of bodily goods, such as food and wealth, based on some fiction of 'worth.' Someone motivated by honor *thinks* they are after what is beautiful, worthy of honor, *as opposed to* the appetitive value of bodily goods. But such is ideology, the account goes. A wise person would sharply distinguish independent facts about what is beautiful from honor, since honor is parasitic on social patterns of esteem. Unmask the ideology, and proud Achilles reveals his true colors.

The balance of passages, however, require a less reductive view of honor. The imaginary city not only includes non-material forms of honor, as children must give the gods (*timaō*, *Rep.* 386a), but also takes pains to bring greater esteem to the philosophical life, now in disrepute (*timiōteron*, 539d). This project has a critical and a constructive phase. The association of honor with money,

we should notice, comes with the figure of Achilles and others in whom spirit is debased. This association serves, in the critical phase, to displace the Homeric view in order, in the constructive phase, to redirect admiration toward philosophic virtue and objects of wisdom. These phases sometimes overlap, such that early education proscribes Achilles' insubordination while cultivating a spirit obedient to reason. But two later moments of the constructive phase show the positive value of honor.

The first of these moments attempts to promote an ethically necessary sense of honor in the auxiliaries through competition in virtue. Their sense of honor correlates to an effective sense of shame (*aidōs*), which opposes unruly appetites and violations of communal norms (e.g., 463d, 465a). But beyond this oppositional role, spirit provides positive motivational energy to perform great and beautiful deeds. The auxiliaries' aspiration to virtue is powered by the prospect of achieving a "more beautiful" (*kalliōn*) victory than at the Olympics and receiving such rewards (*gera*) as a worthy burial (465de). As with Homeric glory, the aesthetic dimension of the *kalon* tracks the fact that virtuous deeds must be conspicuous to earn admiration.²⁴ Indeed, Socrates appropriates an explicitly Homeric pattern of thought to direct spirited desire for admiration toward the greater good:

We, too, at sacrifices and all such occasions will honor [*timēsomen*] the good so far as they have shown themselves good [*agathoi phainōntai*] with hymns and the other ways we just mentioned, 'seats of honor and meats' and 'full cups of wine,' so as to honor [*timan*] at the same time as train good men and women. (*Rep.* 468de, quoting *Il.* 8. 162)

Honor is both a legitimate motivation for auxiliaries trying to become virtuous and a political mechanism for promoting political courage in others.

The second moment extends the concern with honor from auxiliaries to philosophers. If honor were not a distinct good, it would be odd that Socrates cares as much as he does how philosophy is regarded. Philosophers receive honors in their education (503d, 537d) and, better than the auxiliaries, public memorials and sacrifices after they rule (540c). No doubt honor here is instrumentally valuable, both to draw on the motivational power of spirit in the development of virtue and to create political conditions for philosophers to rule or even to survive. Yet it is not

merely instrumentally valuable. The philosopher herself finds some importance in honor, if conferred by the right audience in recognition of virtue. She willingly partakes in honors (*tas timas*), including political offices, if they will be beneficial (592a). She has apparently (somehow) enjoyed the pleasure of being honored, at least more than honor-lovers enjoy the pleasures of knowledge (582c). It is true that the philosopher is critical of what passes for honor among the many, the rich, or the nobility. As when, in the allegory of the cave, someone returns to find conventional patterns of esteem based on ‘shadows’ of virtue (516cd), philosophers “will look down on [*kataphronēsōsin*] present honors” and think them “worth nothing” (*oudenos axias*). However, Socrates continues in a constructive turn, these philosophers will “deem greatest what is right and the honors [*tas timas*] that come from it” (540de). In place of what honor is – or was with Homer – comes a new, distinctly philosophical view of honor. It is a difficult question precisely how a corresponding philosophical spirit would be structured. It may be that, looking down on present honors, the philosopher in a non-ideal city reasonably expects only a few fellow intellectuals or, perhaps, only the gods to admire their virtue. A central political task of the *Republic*, however, is to ensure that virtue is more widely admired and recognized.

4. Concluding Remarks

I have tried in this short compass to show that ancient Greek debate about honor is in crucial respects more continuous with theoretical discourse of recognition than has been appreciated. Ancient Greek honor embodies a norm of mutual respect among members of a community and esteem for individual character and conduct. Several standards of worth within the community make claims to honor contestable, indeed contested, first within the Homeric framework and against that framework by Plato. While he criticizes the nature, value, and ethical psychology of honor in Homer, Plato takes seriously the human desire at its core to be someone worthy of admiration. Both agree that a good person needs a sense of shame and honor, in which one’s practical identity is bound up with the positive regard of others.

My aim has been to open, not to settle, the question whether ancient Greeks have a concept of recognition. Of course, the concept has its primary point in an entirely different problematic. Whatever structural similarities we might draw between Platonic spirit and Rousseau’s *amour propre* or Hegelian mutual recognition, for instance, ancient Greek thinkers are not pressed to

explain how self-consciousness develops or how political institutions should enshrine mutual respect for autonomy. Still, such similarities can counterbalance the tendency to contrast recognition with an impoverished notion of honor or to assume ancient Greek thinkers more confused than complex when they cut across modern moral distinctions between respect and esteem. In the other direction, we may also notice features of social and political life less emphasized in but congenial to contemporary discussions of recognition. One powerful strand running from Homer to Plato, for example, is that the value of honor attests the importance of *appearing before others* in human life. We saw this importance in the way honors and virtuous deeds must be conspicuous to satisfy desires for honor; and normatively, that shame and a sense of honor depend upon fundamentally aesthetic values, what is beautiful or admirable (*kalon*) and ugly or shameful (*aischron*), and shared norms in terms of which one can show oneself and be admired for virtue. While this strand of thought has found no less prominent an exponent than Hannah Arendt, many theorists, like Rousseau (*Second Discourse* II.27), dismiss concern with appearances as deceitful or vain, a mask covering reality and one's true worth. Perhaps for this reason, the aesthetics of appearance have seldom been discussed under the head of recognition.²⁵ Beyond the province of honor, there are fertile connections in this area, whether it be self-expression in dress, political uses of protest art, or the fact that oppressive structures render the worth of human beings invisible. In this way, to ask whether ancient Greeks have a concept of recognition is to rethink not only the history of recognition but also its future.

References

- Adkins, Arthur. 1960. *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2010. *Honour Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*. New York; London: WW Norton & Co.
- Berger, Peter. 1970. "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor." *European Journal of Sociology*. 11(2): 339–347.
- Brennan, Tad. 2012. "The nature of the spirited part of the soul and its object". In *Plato and the Divided Self*. Edited by Rachel Barney, Tad Brennan, and Charles Brittain, 102–127. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Cairns, Douglas L. 1993. (1993) *Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and in Ancient Greek Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 2011. “Honour and Shame: Modern Controversies and Ancient Values.” *Critical Quarterly* 53(1): 23–41.
- , Mirko Canevaro, and Kleanthis Mantzouranis. 2022. “Recognition and redistribution in Aristotle’s account of stasis.” *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 39(1): 1–34.
- Carnevali, Barbara. 2020. *Social Appearances: A Philosophy of Display and Prestige*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. New York: Columbia University Press
- Congdon, Matthew. 2021. “The Aesthetics of Moral Address.” *Philosophical Topics* 49(1): 123–144.
- Darwall, Stephen. 1977. “Two Kinds of Respect.” *Ethics* 88: 36–49.
- . 2013. *Honor, History, and Relationship: Essays in Second-Personal Ethics II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Debes, Remy, ed. 2017. *Dignity: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Donlan, Walter. 1982. “Reciprocities in Homer.” *The Classical World* 75(3): 137–175.
- Fine, Jonathan. 2020. “The Guise of the Beautiful: *Symp.* 204d ff.” *Phronesis* 65: 129–152.
- Finkelberg, Margalit. 1997. “*Timē* and *Aretē* in Homer.” *The Classical Quarterly* 48(1): 14–28.
- Fussi, Alessandra. 2008. “The Desire for Recognition in Plato’s *Symposium*.” *Arethusa* 41(2): 237–262.
- Gill, Christopher. 1996. *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hammer, Dean. 2002. “The *Iliad* as Ethical Thinking: Politics, Pity, and the Operation of Esteem.” *Arethusa* 35(2): 203–235.
- Hobbs, Angela. 2000. *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Honneth, Axel. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- . 2021. *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*. Translated by Joel Ganahl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Jimenez, Marta. 2021. *Aristotle on Shame and Learning to Be Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kahlos, Maijastina, Heikki J. Koskinen, and Ritva Palmén, eds. 2019. *Recognition and Religion: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*. Routledge: Oxford.
- Krause, Sharon R. 2002. *Liberalism with Honor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mark, D. Clifton. 2014. "Recognition and Honor: A Critique of Axel Honneth's and Charles Taylor's Histories of Recognition." *Constellations* 21(1): 16–31.
- Martin, Richard. 2011. Introduction to Lattimore, Richard, trans. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Neuhouser, Frederick. 2008. *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, Frank Henderson. 1994. *Honor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tarnopolsky, Christina. 2012. "Recognizing our Misrecognitions: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Recognition." In *Recognition and Modes of Knowledge: Anagnorisis from Antiquity to Contemporary Theory*. Edited by Teresa G. Russo, 241–260. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Edited by Amy Gutmann, 25–73. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Toto, Francesco, Théophile Pénigaud de Mourgues, and Emanuel Renault, eds. 2017 *La reconnaissance avant la reconnaissance : Archéologie d'une problématique modern*. Lyon: ENS Éditions.
- Redfield, James. 1975. *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: the Tragedy of Hector*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Renaut, Olivier. 2014. *La médiation des émotions. L'éducation du thymos dans les dialogues*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin.
- Richardson Lear, Gabriel. 2006. "Plato on Learning to Love Beauty." In *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*. Edited by Gerasimos Santas, 104–124. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Saarinen, Risto. 2016. *Recognition and Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sommers, Tamler. 2018. *Why Honor Matters*. New York: Basic Books.

- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1980. “La belle mort et le cadavre outrage.” *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique* 77(2–3): 209–241.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 2012. *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*. Edited by Meir Dan-Cohen. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1993. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Wilburn, Joshua. 2021. *The Political Soul: Plato on Thumos, Spirited Motivation, and the City*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yamagata, Naoko 1994. *Homeric Morality*. Leiden: Brill.
- Zanker, Graham. 1994. *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

¹ See for example Toto, Pénigaud de Mourgues, and Renault 2017; Honneth 2021; for emphasis on medieval theological contributions, Saarinen 2016 and Kahlos, Koskinen, and Palmén 2019. Notable discussions of recognition in ancient Greek philosophy include Tarnopolsky 2014 and Cairns, Carnevaro, and Mantzouranis 2022; cf. the suggestive title of Fussi 2008.

² Taylor and Honneth both follow Berger 1970 on the supposed ‘obsolescence’ of honor in modernity: “The social location of honor lies in a world of relatively intact, stable institutions, a world in which individuals can with subjective certainty attach their identities to the institutional roles that society assigns to them. The disintegration of this world as a result of the forces of modernity has not only made honor an increasingly meaningless notion...” (345).

³ For an argument that dignity arose out of and remains tied to social rank, see Waldron 2012. Debes 2017 offers a broader conceptual history of dignity in a more restricted *moralized* sense. For historically grounded philosophical defenses of honor, see Krause 2002, Appiah 2010, Sommers 2018. I am indebted to Mark 2014, which brings these considerations to bear Taylor’s and Honneth’s history of recognition.

⁴ For extensive references to *timē*, see Yamagata 1994: 121–38.

⁵ One definition of *aidōs* in the standard Greek-English lexicon compiled by Liddell, Scott, and Jones. Stewart 1994, ch. 3 defines a sense of honor similarly but dates its rise much later.

⁶ The Kantian charge, most powerfully advanced by Adkins 1960, remains curiously influential. Jimenez 2021, ch. 4 must still overcome the objection that Aristotelian shame is heteronomous.

⁷ This use of ‘respect’ resembles but is distinct from what Stephen Darwall calls ‘honor respect,’ a species of ‘recognition respect’ (2013, ch. 1; cf. Darwall 1977). One gives recognition respect when one regulates one’s conduct towards someone by giving appropriate weight to some fact about them. In another species of recognition respect, ‘second-personal respect,’ that fact is their dignity or authority as persons. In honor respect, that fact is their social status, and respect is a matter of conduct alone. In Homer, similarly, deference and etiquette are often necessary to honor someone. Yet such behavior is not sufficient, nor is it sufficient to ‘recognize’ a social fact in this purely epistemic sense. It is necessary and sometimes sufficient to believe the recipient is worthy of honor. Darwall assigns this attitude to ‘appraisal respect,’ a form of esteem for individual conduct or character. Homeric honor therefore cuts across his distinction between appraisal and recognition respect. It encompasses respect among peers and esteem, as Appiah 2010 claims of honor generally. This taxonomical difference turns on a disagreement whether honor is a normative status, which Darwall denies and Appiah maintains. In calling Homeric honor a normative status, I am sympathetic to Appiah’s broader view of ethical normativity; however, I would not claim, with Cairns 2011, 32, that Homeric honor contains a concept of morality.

⁸ Translations are mine throughout, emphasis here added.

⁹ This point is later emphasized by Hobbes (*Leviathan* I.10) and Mandeville in his 1732 *Enquiry into the Origin of Honor and the Usefulness of Christianity in War*, which traces honor to self-liking, the tendency to value oneself highly (First Dialogue, 2–3).

¹⁰ Finkelberg 1998, 19–20 rightly notes that Homeric honor is based on social status but takes status and wealth to determine virtue.

¹¹ This is to develop in historical detail a systematic point about honor made by Mark 2014.

¹² For the title ‘best of the Achaeans,’ see *Il.* 1. 244, 412; 2. 239, 769; 4. 512–13; 5. 788–91; 7. 114; 11. 787; 16. 709; 18. 106; 22. 158.

¹³ This is Agamemnon’s misinterpretation. He threatens to steal Briseis himself to prove “how much better” (*pherteros*) he is than Achilles, lest others think themselves “equal” (*ison*, 1. 184–87). Achilles said it was “better” (*pherteros*) to return to his ships (169). Agamemnon uses the term to compete on Achilles’ terrain: *pherteros* usually means *braver* or *stronger*, better as a warrior: *Il.* 3. 431; 4. 56, 19. 217. In his attempt at reconciliation, Nestor grants that Agamemnon

is “better” (*pherteros*) as *king* but Achilles is “stronger” (*karteros*, *Il.* 280-81). This awkward use of ‘better’ captures the competing and ambiguous standards of worth within the community.

¹⁴ See Vernant 1980 for discussion.

¹⁵ Versions of this reading may be found, for example, in Redfield 1975, 99–108; Zanker 1994, 86–91; Hammer 2002; and Martin 2011, 21 (‘rejects the entire system of honor as material payment’).

¹⁶ More precisely, Chrysippus finds in Achilles’ consolation of Priam (*Il.* 24. 549–51) a model of Stoic extirpation of emotion. The focus is grief rather than anger. See Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 4.6.40–1, 4.7.24–8 = *SVF* 3.478, 3.467.

¹⁷ As Gill 1996, 144 (with n171) notes, Achilles gets the message. He retorts that Agamemnon should find a ‘kinglier’ son-in-law (*basileuteros*, *Il.* 9. 392) and that he can marry whomever he likes (395–400).

¹⁸ Love of honor and victory: *e.g.*, *Rep.* 545a, 548cd, 550b, 551a, 553b, 554e–555a, 581a; connected to the *kalon*: *e.g.*, 401e–402a, 439e–440a, 465de, 555a. See further Cairns 1993, 387 and Brennan 2012, though the intentionality of spirited motivation remains debated.

¹⁹ On the social nature of spirit, see Renaut 2014 and Wilburn 2021.

²⁰ *Émile* II.160, trans. Bloom of *OC* IV.258: “*d’être compté pour quelque chose*”. I owe the reference to Neuhouser 2008, 67. Neuhouser’s view that *amour propre* is responsible for social and psychological goods, not just problems, brings it closer to Platonic spirit. Hobbs may agree, given her passing reference to Achilles’ “intense *amour propre*” (2000, 201 n10).

²¹ See further Richardson Lear 2006 on how cultural education in beauty shapes the social psychology of spirit.

²² The Homeric background to Platonic spirit is well reviewed by Renaut 2014: 26–46, 122–24, 190–206, who attributes to the latter “un désir de reconnaissance” (190).

²³ See Hobbs 2000, ch. 7. Hobbs proposes further (215–27) that Plato identifies the good and the beautiful (*kalon*) to deny, *contra* Achilles, that these values irreconcilably conflict. Achilles’ deliberation does not issue this problem, however, and Plato appreciates how, from an agent’s perspective, beauty often seems *not* to be good. I discuss the latter point in Fine 2020.

²⁴ The aesthetic dimension of the *kalon* complicates the view that Plato associates “concern for appearances” with an “unfettered love of honor,” as Cairns 1993, 390 states, despite the drift of his account. Cf. language of appearance (*phainōntai*) quoted immediately below.

²⁵ But see, recently, Carnevali 2020 and Congdon 2021.