THE NORMATIVE CLAIMS OF THREE TYPES OF FEMINIST STRUGGLES FOR RECOGNITION

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If we start from a notion of critical theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age" (as Marx put it), then we seem today to face an irony of intellectual history. For feminist thought of all types has hewed more closely to this definition than the socio-political theory arising under the banner of "the Frankfurt School" seems to have done. While the Frankfurt School tradition has historically combined both the Kantian project of an epistemological and methodological critique of the natural and human sciences with the Hegelian project of an historical-normative critique of instrumental and functionalist forms of rationality, it appears to have become distanced from determinate, concrete analyses and evaluations of contemporary social and political struggles. The project I am proposing here is an attempt to gauge the usefulness of a recent paradigm for critical theory that begins from a form of struggle particularly prevalent in the last thirty years: namely, struggles over identity and recognition. Finding Axel Honneth's recent work particularly compelling here,[1] I would like to see whether it can help to clarify some of the debates over the distinct normative claims proffered by universalist and difference feminists, the differential burdens of justification for these claims, and the ensuing recommendations concerning appropriate strategies for political action. In a rather programmatic form, I would like to indicate some of the fruitfulness of Honneth's model for introducing needed distinctions in these debates, while noting places where his theory needs to be modified in the light of insights generated from feminist analyses. It is important to note as a caveat that this approach to political issues of identity and recognition is *not* intended to comprehend struggles over the distribution of material goods, even if certain recognition struggles may require transformed distributive mechanisms for success.[2] Hopefully the paradigm introduced here in outline form will not foreclose further research into the connections and tensions between recognition and distribution struggles.

Overview of Ontogenesis, the Social Conditions for Healthy Self-Relation, and the Priority of Struggles

Very briefly, Honneth's theory starts from an account of identity formation as an on-going, intersubjective process of struggling to gain mutual recognition from one's partners in interaction. Through this process of struggle, individuals develop three different forms of relation-to-self through three different types of social interaction: (1) *self-confidence* is gained in primary, affective relations, (2) *self-respect* in legal relations of rights, and (3) *self-esteem* in local communities defined by shared value orientations. These intersubjective processes of learning "to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners to interaction, as their social addressee"[3] are the media through which individuals become who they are, and within which social forms of life are continually maintained and reproduced.[4]

First, individuals can only gain healthy self-confidence in themselves within relations of mutual recognition to primary others supported by unconditional love and affection. Without this, they cannot trust the basic stability of both their own identities and the world around them. Second, self-respect is achieved in the mutual acknowledgment of one's formal capacity for autonomous moral action. Through the universal rights and entitlements that a formal legal system accords to all members of a society, just insofar as they *are* members of that society, individuals are able to understand themselves as equals of other members, both required to treat others respectfully in relations of symmetrical reciprocity, and entitled to make their own decisions about how to conceive of and realize their own life plans. The third form of recognition occurs through one's

valued participation in and positive contribution to a shared way of life that expresses distinctive, communally held values. In a group defined by social solidarity, one is able to achieve self-esteem by being recognized as a distinct individual, with particular traits and abilities that positively contribute to the shared projects of that community.

Honneth then develops his social theory through an account of the structural interconnection between (a) the three levels of individual identity development, (b) the three forms of intersubjective recognition required for each level, and (c) the forms of social organization needed as preconditions for the healthy, undistorted self-realization of that society's members. This structural interconnection then provides a basis for explaining processes of social change—explicating both the impulse for expanded recognition and the normative claims raised in social struggles for individual and group recognition. For, when individual experiences of disrespect are understood as the norm for all members of a certain group—when disrespect is experienced epidemically—the potential motivation exists for collective political resistance to the structures of society which systematically deny the members of that group the recognition they need for full self-realization. Furthermore, these struggles are normatively justifiable on the grounds that such systematic forms of disrespect impede the mutual recognition required for the maintenance and reproduction of healthy forms of self-relation and self-realization.

Two further points about this model. According to Honneth, these three forms of self-relation are achieved in a developmental hierarchy with a directional logic—the full realization of each subsequent form requires the healthy realization of the previous one. This implies, for example, that struggles against social structures which threaten basic self-confidence should be given strategic precedence over struggles oriented to the social conditions of self-esteem. Second, motivation is an integral part of this model, since the impetus for demanding recognition from others comes from the felt injuries of disrespect. Thus physical abuse, rape, and torture are paradigmatic forms of disrespect threatening self-confidence, the denial of equal rights and legal protections threatens self-respect, and the denigration and degradation of shared ways of life threatens self-esteem. This connection means that the traditional theoretical gap between normativity and motivation is at least partially closed, since specific experiences of disrespect can be tied to the three different ways in which identity development is deformed, and these deformations in turn form the basis for the justification for social transformation.

My programmatic hypothesis is that, with Honneth's tripartite distinction between forms of recognition and their corresponding forms of social struggle, certain dichotomies in feminist debates over identity and recognition should be reconceived as distinct aspects of ontogenesis and recognition politics: atomistic autonomy vs. affective mutuality, legal universality vs. cultural difference, justice vs. care, and so on. In this essay, I treat only the dichotomy between universalist and difference politics.

Three Moments of Struggle: Physical Integrity (Dworkin), Justice (Okin), and Difference (Young)

I think that Honneth's link between three forms of recognition, three forms of disrespect, and three forms of social struggle can be helpful in clarifying many of the important issues raised by feminists precisely because it points to the different kinds of moral claims being raised in different struggles for recognition, and shows the differential burdens of justification taken on for those claims. For example, in her book *Intercourse,*[5] Andrea Dworkin has articulately highlighted how the physical degradation and violation involved in rape and sexual abuse are harmful to victims not simply because of the manifest pain and suffering involved, but more fundamentally because such violation makes it impossible for the development of self-confidence. Insofar as one's basic trust in the constancy of the intersubjective world is shattered, one is fundamentally unable to maintain a stable identity, or to participate adequately in social relations, let alone fully realize oneself. Precisely because the degradation of one's own body involves the destruction, from the outside, of one's most basic form of relation-to-self—namely, self-confidence—claims to be free of physical harassment are the most transcendent of particular historical situations and social arrangements. As Honneth puts it, "Since such forms of basic psychological self-confidence

carry emotional preconditions that follow a largely invariant logic associated with the intersubjective balance between fusion and demarcation, this experience of disrespect also cannot simply vary with the historical period or the cultural frame of reference."[6] One deserves one's physical integrity just because one exists as a person.

In contrast, in struggles for expanded formal and legal recognition of previously excluded groups, the claims being raised are more indexed to particular contexts. The structure of self-respect is such that the claims for the expansion of formal rights can only be met when the law is able to take into account the equal interests of all affected. While these claims for the expansion of justice are universalist in abstracting from individual particularities, they are historically specific insofar as the determinate set of rights enacted in any given society is contextualized to the history of legal struggles in that society. Of course once any specific right is granted to some members of a legal order, such as suffrage in a democratic order, that right needs to be universally extended to all members of the polity irrespective of any contingent particularities, since each must be granted the cognitive respect due to equally autonomous agents. Here Susan Okin's call for the expansion of reciprocity and justice into the "private" sphere of the family is apropos, since she is able to show that the asymmetrical and gendered structure of the family which puts women at a significant disadvantage in society is tied to the "unequal distribution of the unpaid labor of the family."[7] Insofar as a society is committed to some form of the norm of "equal pay for equal work," the systematic exclusion of a certain type of labor traditionally associated with women from this norm not only materially restricts the liberty of women, but, as Okin shows, negatively impacts the ability of women to regard themselves as equal participants in reciprocal interactive relations. And here, the burden of convincing the society that its current structures of recognition with respect to equality are inadequate consists in showing how purportedly gender-neutral and universal social structures of equal remunerative respect for equal labor are not in fact extended far enough to cover the irreplaceable reproductive labor of the "private" familial sphere.

At the third level of evaluative recognition necessary for self-esteem, the burdens of groups struggling against the social denigration of shared ways of life is even higher. Since self-esteem is realized through the intersubjective recognition of one's unique talents, interests, and contributions by those who share one's horizon of values, the claim to be esteemed is inextricably bound up with the interpretive understanding of an ethical community. The moral claims raised in such social struggles are different than those raised in conflicts over bodily integrity and formal rights, for what is being demanded here is that the strong evaluations of one's own community be accepted by other groups and persons as acceptable and potentially worthy. The justification of claims for expanded esteem will involve convincing others who do not share one's vision of the good life that there is something worthwhile and meaningful in an alternative way of life, and that one cannot fully realize oneself without having these aspects esteemed.

Note that the claim is not that other communities of value should recognize one's own horizon of value as worthy for them, but only that one's horizon of values is, in some sense, a viable form of life that creates conditions for reciprocal relations of esteem within it. Convincing a majority that a minority way of life should not be denigrated involves showing both that slurs on that way of life negatively impact the ability of individuals living within it to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem, and that, that way of life enables full self-realization for its members. Of course, this latter claim will depend on the crucial proviso that the way of life under consideration does not negatively impact the ability of those who identify with it to develop both self-confidence and self-respect. So, for instance, a community of value cannot selectively constrain the exit options of some of its members since, as Okin shows, this would impair their ability to realize self-respect. Again, what the denigrated group needs to convince others of is not that their particular way of life is worthy, valuable, or "true" for all persons, but only that it is one viable form of life that articulates an evaluative horizon within which individuals can develop and realize their own self-esteem. The complexity of these claims, and the ineliminable contextual and hermeneutical aspects they involve, are precisely

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what give rise to the highly contested nature of much contemporary "cultural" politics.

I would like to locate the work of difference feminists such as Iris Marion Young under this third form of struggles for expanded conditions for self-esteem.[8] Her understanding of a liberationist politics of identity is motivated precisely by the insight into the oppressive nature of systematic, group denigration through what she calls "cultural imperialism" and "violence." Her call for a politics of difference where "culturally despised groups seize the means of cultural expression to redefine a positive image of themselves"[9] is precisely a call for establishing the socially necessary bases of self-esteem in solidaristically reproduced forms of ethical life. She connects the need for self-esteem to the intersubjective recognition of both an individual's and an "affinity" group's specificity, precisely because here esteem can only be generated through the solidarity of a group which defines itself through its relation to and differences from other groups.

But if Honneth's account of the normative force behind struggles for recognition is right, then Young's call for group-conscious political policies seems misplaced. For, in developing her arguments against forms of oppression, she relies on the notion that oppressions harm individuals, but in backing her claim for group-conscious social rights as requirements of social justice, she seems to slide to a position that grants social groups, as collectivities, intrinsic worth. On the one hand, she defines social equality as "the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society's major institutions, and the socially supported substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices."[10] But from this, she concludes that "a culturally pluralist democratic ideal . . . supports group conscious policies . . . as intrinsic to the ideal of social equality itself. Groups cannot be socially equal unless their specific experience, culture, and social contributions are publicly affirmed and recognized."[11] One way to see this problem from another angle is that calling for political rights recognizing group specificity precisely undermines the essential non-equality raised in a claim for esteeming the *worth* of a way of life, since it tries to secure the qualitative distinctions of worth necessary for full self-realization through impartialist mechanisms.[12] Policies tailored to groups can certainly be secured in political discourses over collective forms of identity, and within the broader goals of a democratic polity, but such policies are not well served by the moral language of rights. Rather, such debates are part and parcel of that vast domain of democratic opinion and will formation that is concerned with the ethical identity of the nation as a whole *and* as a collection of both discreet and overlapping groups.

Tensions and Open Problems

Although this typology and analysis of the three different kinds of struggles for recognition can clarify the normative claims raised in these different feminist analyses, it does raise at least four types of concerns. First, Young's convincing account of the fluid and multidimensional character of group affiliations and identifications is preferable to Honneth's overly-encompassing, holistic characterization of solidaristic communities of value. Because Honneth relies on a sociological and philosophical tradition that has focused its attention on the world of work, his account of the social structures conducive to the development of self-esteem seems to imply that each individual belongs to one primary community of value within which he or she can be recognized as making a productive and distinctive contribution. But I think that this picture is sociologically deficient: individuals belong to many different kinds of communities of value simultaneously, a fact that is perhaps more clear in America than elsewhere. Second, there are also important differences between communities of value constituted through renounceable identifications and those formed around ascriptive identifications. For instance, one is ascribed a sex or a race, but one may renounce one's religious heritage.

The question raised by both of these ways of showing the complexity of group identifications is whether they affect the normative logic of recognition claims formed around the social bases of self-esteem. For instance, in the moral domain of rights and self-respect, the difference between renounceable and ascriptive identifications is certainly crucial—hence, the apparent moral relevance of scientific claims concerning the natural or socially constructed character of sexual orientation. But in the third domain of self-esteem, I do not believe that the normative logic is changed. For even if one is struggling for expanded social recognition of the many different groups one identifies or is identified with, the claim to the

broader society is still that those groups provide a necessary basis for recognizing one with respect to a worthy aspect of one's distinctive capacities and achievements. In this case, in does not matter whether one's original identification with the group is voluntary or ascriptive, for the claim to the broader society in both cases depends upon the voluntary endorsement of that particular way of life as worthy for oneself and the other members of the group.

Third, Young makes a powerful argument that the actual distribution of political participation rights is dependent upon healthy self-esteem gained in differential groups. If this is so, then it appears to be sufficient reason to undermine Honneth's separation of issues concerning formal legality and ethical solidarity. If one cannot fully participate as an equal in legal discourses over rights without having already having been recognized as particularly worthy within a solidaristic community, then the stage sequence claimed by Honneth from self-confidence, to self-respect, to self-esteem is put into question. This is related to a fourth problem, namely, the way in which Honneth's prioritization of the three forms of recognition struggles can lead to divisive politics and the fragmentation of social energies when put into practice. If Honneth is correct, then excluded groups should first secure full and equal legal recognition before focusing on ethical struggles, since the harms of legal dis-respect are more basic than those of ethical denigration. But if Young is right, then ethical denigration makes it impossible for individuals to exercise their formally-granted participation rights. I'm not sure that these questions can be answered by philosophical analysis and in the absence of further empirical data about the relationship between self-respect and self-esteem. It still seems an open question.

I have tried to indicate, in a programmatic way, how Honneth's analysis of the three different kinds of recognition required for self-realization, of the social bases required for those kinds of recognition, and of the differential normative burdens taken on in justifying calls for the expansion of the social relations required for the different kinds of recognition can help to alleviate some of the apparent tensions evinced in feminist debates between universalist and difference feminists. Although this recognition paradigm may not solve practical, political problems of prioritization and strategy, it can help to show that apparently antithetical concerns actually lie at different levels and need to be treated separately without choosing between them. I also believe that similar results could be gained by looking at other dichotomies arising in feminist thought—such as justice vs. care, individualism vs. mutuality, and consensus vs. dissensus—with the help of this paradigm.

ENDNOTES

1. Brief overviews of his conception can be found in Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition," *Political Theory* 20 (1992): 187–201, and, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today," *Constellations* 1 (1994): 255–69. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) gives a fuller treatment.

2. Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Postsocialist' Age," in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routlege, 1997), pp. 11–40, raises important questions concerning the likelihood of eradicating the tensions between recognition and distribution

struggles, and warns against an over-reliance on recognition paradigms for feminist political theory.

3. Honneth, *Struggles for Recognition,* p. 92.

4. A table at the end of the paper summarizes Honneth's tripartite distinctions.

5. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1987).

6. Honneth, *Struggles for Recognition,* p. 133.

7. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 25.

8. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

9. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* p. 11.

10. Ibid., p. 173.

11. Ibid., p. 174.

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12. The different logics involved in calling for equal political rights and calling for esteem of qualitatively distinct ethical frameworks of evaluations have been consistent themes of Charles Taylor's work. For a recent formulation, see his "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 25–73.

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