

The Ethics of Recognition and the Normativity of Social Relations: Some Notes on Axel Honneth's Materialist Philosophical Anthropology

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Abstract:

My reconstruction of Axel Honneth's "ethics of recognition" will go through three steps. First, it is necessary to acknowledge the normative deficit in the predominant language of Scholastic metaphysics that we usually use here in the Philippines to speak about the human person—it is an anthropological-philosophical model that cannot account for the materiality or normativity of social relations, thus, failing to understand human autonomy in concrete terms. Second, I discuss the critical potential of critical theory in the diagnosis of social pathologies via a radicalization of the socio-political role of philosophy. Third, I reconstruct in very schematic form, Honneth's ethics of recognition by highlighting the three spheres of recognition—care, respect, and esteem—in order to articulate a materialist alternative to the constitution of individual autonomy.

Keywords:

Honneth, Frankfurt School, ethics of recognition, critical theory, philosophical anthropology

Introduction: The Social Deficit of Philosophy

Frankfurt School Critical Theory, as a distinct philosophical attitude geared towards the critical analysis of various socio-political spheres, is unfortunately not a widely-known philosophical tradition in Philippine philosophical circles. In a way—with the possible exception of some familiarity with the works of Jürgen Habermas, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm—the Frankfurt School tradition is still a *terra incognita* to most of us. Inasmuch as the works of the so-called Frankfurt School critical theorists are potent theoretico-practical tools in diagnosing societal ills in the Philippines, this short paper is one of a series of projects that form part of my humble attempt at introducing the philosophico-critical potential of the Frankfurt School tradition. I will do this via a reconstruction of Axel Honneth's "ethics of recognition" from a materialist-anthropological standpoint.¹

Even though today the topic of recognition already occupies a central place in contemporary debates in social and political theory in the West², thanks to the efforts of Honneth, it does not however enjoy the same status here in the Philippines. While there is reason to celebrate the fact that local philosophical circles are generally very open to various schools of thought in philosophy, one observes a discernible deficit in the way philosophy is generally understood and taught in universities. To be more precise, the philosophical enterprise here in the Philippines, as we know it, suffers from a failure to reflect on factual realities that materially shape our psycho-socio-political behaviour and the ensuing pathological consequences therein. As philosophers, we cannot exactly claim that we have overcome the language of what we may refer to as "Scholastic metaphysics." One even wonders if there is indeed a conscious effort on our part as a collective community of "enlightened" philosophers to free ourselves from the clutches of the language of Scholastic metaphysics. Even a cursory survey of the history of Western philosophy reveals that paradigm shifts are discernible as linguistic shifts, giving us the impression that philosophic (and scientific) maturity is marked by the conscious and continuous revision of predominant linguistic-conceptual apparatuses, that is to say, the revision of regulative

¹ Axel Honneth, a former student of Habermas, is the current Director of the Institute of Social Research at the Johann-Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main and whose work is considered to be the most comprehensive critical account of the Frankfurt School tradition in terms of intellectual history. Honneth's project of evincing a normative ethics of recognition has been construed to be a critical reception of, and continuous critical dialogue with, First Generation (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse) and Second Generation (Habermas) Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Against this backdrop, Honneth's recognition theory is seen as the most advanced development in the Critical Theory tradition of Germany which still considers itself to be within the framework of the Frankfurt School.

² Recognition as a philosophical theme based on Hegel's early Jena writings has been developed in different ways by Herbert Mead, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Charles Taylor, and Nancy Fraser. See Bert van den Brink and David Owen, "Introduction," in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

descriptions that we use to make sense of reality. We owe the colonizing Spaniards our initial introduction to the philosophical world, and our reception of the language of Scholastic metaphysics could be traced back to the pedagogical influence of the Spanish friars.³ If we ask ourselves earnestly as to whether we have progressed in terms of philosophizing since the Spanish friars introduced the language of Scholastic metaphysics, I believe the answer is quite obvious—and obvious even in the way we speak about the nature of the “human person.” Again, to be more precise, we have not fully emancipated ourselves from speaking about the human person or the autonomous subject in “essentialist” terms—that is to say, from a philosophical discourse which derives a notion of human autonomy⁴ from transcendent or formal principles that undergird the human capacity for “rational” action. The upshot of our preoccupation with essentialism—whether in the body of Thomism, phenomenology, or analytic philosophy of mind—is that we end up with a notion of an isolated, atomistic subject, that is far-removed from his/her historical, sociological, and political situatedness. We do not only unwittingly repeat the Cartesian mistake of isolating the *Cogito* from the *res extensa* that constitutes it, but in the process we also fail to identify the modern problems of social injustice and alienation as basically problems of material subjectivity. We fail to realize that social reality and subjectivity are inextricably and constitutively related and, as such, we fail to realize that the socio-political pathologies plaguing us for so long have their genealogical basis in the structure of our social institutions and normative practices. In a word, despite the fact that we seek a philosophical understanding of “man” or the “human person,” our metaphysical language itself restricts our analysis to an abstract understanding of the rationality of human agency, while ignoring the more constitutive fact of subjectivity’s social embeddedness.

As opposed to the isolated, atomistic (and perhaps schizophrenic) subject of the essentialist model, Honneth’s theory of recognition locates human subjectivity or autonomy in the social embeddedness of the human person. Following Hegel’s theory of the dialectical development of self-consciousness⁵, Honneth argues that

“... the development and realization of individual autonomy is in a certain sense, only possible when subjects have the social preconditions for realizing their life goals without unjustifiable disadvantages and with the greatest possible freedom.”⁶

³ For a brief, yet comprehensive, history of philosophy in the Philippines, see Alfredo. P. Co, “In the Beginning . . . A Petit Personal Historical Narrative of the Beginning of Philosophy in the Philippines,” in *Across the Philosophical Silk Road: A Festschrift in Honor of Alfredo P. Co [Doing Philosophy in the Philippines and Other Essays, Volume VI]* (Manila: University of Santo Thomas Publishing House, 2009), 28-46.

⁴ Autonomy could be roughly understood here as the ability of an individual to live an ethical life, that is, to act ethically with other autonomous subjects.

⁵ “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.” G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §178.

⁶ Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christine Wilke (London: Verso, 2003), 259.

Honneth considers autonomy to be ontologically situated in human interaction, which means that subjectivity—or the “self-consciousness” of an individual as Hegel puts it—is only possible as a socially or materially constituted reality. Both Hegel and Honneth insist that the genealogical basis of human subjectivity has a dialectical-normative basis in self-reflexivity, which can only be understood as a self-reflexivity (self-consciousness) that achieves maturity/autonomy via being conscious of other self-consciousness or, to extrapolate from the Hegelian formulation, the self is materially constituted that it is a product of the concrete forces that surround it. To be more specific, Honneth locates the possibility of individual autonomy in social relations with others wherein social others are emphatically *responsive* to the needs of the subject in terms of 1) care, 2) respect, and 3) esteem.⁷ These three spheres of recognition are understood materially inasmuch as they are responses that originate from socially constituted relations. In social-ontological terms, these three spheres of recognition form the normative core upon which the realization of human autonomy becomes possible—or, as Honneth puts it, they are the “pre-conditions that must be available for individual subjects to realize their autonomy.”⁸ The misrecognition of these spheres are caused, according to Honneth, by pathological social relations where, for instance, ideological prejudices such as racism, sexism, feudalism, or ultra-commercialism (to name but a few) predominate as part of the normative life of a society.

Critical Theory as Philosophical Praxis

Based on the above discussion, one can delimit that the nature of Frankfurt School Critical Theory has to do with the radicalization of the role of philosophy. The members of the Frankfurt School envision a revision of philosophy’s receptivity to the dynamics of our socio-political life or, more precisely, philosophy’s role of critically disclosing the social pathologies engendered within society.⁹ Given this revisionist notion of philosophy, or what we may refer to as the socio-political turn, what is at stake is the critical reading of our “normative” life. “Normativity” is a key term in Critical Theory, especially for Honneth, which refers to our standard practices that undergird our moral and institutional valuations. Critical theory treats normativity in three interrelated levels. First is that a critique of society is necessarily grounded in our receptivity to the dynamics of our normative behaviour. As such, the critique of social pathologies (e.g., the uprooting of individual autonomy via the misrecognition of the spheres of care, respect, and esteem;

⁷ See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. by Joel Anderson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), Chapter 5.

⁸ Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, 178.

⁹ For a more comprehensive account of how the disclosure of social pathologies could be the normative content of philosophy, see Part I of Honneth’s *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

systemic oppression) can only be done when normative standards become part of our cognitive field, that is, when we become extra-sensitive and critical of social conditions. Critical theorists are quite emphatic on the tendency of normative practices towards hypostatization, resulting in so called social pathologies.

Second, as part of our cognitive field, we subject normative resources to our “critical assessment.” It is crucial to question the fossilization or hypostatization of normative practices, for the process of critique opens up these practices to reevaluation and revision. In other words, by being extra aware of the nuances of societal conditions, we could direct the energies of philosophy towards the “disclosure” of social pathologies. Honneth writes:

“If we claim that a society’s characteristic desires or interests have taken a wrong turn, or if we problematize the mechanisms by which they are generated, then we are implicitly defending the thesis that a given set of social relations had violated the conditions which constitute a necessary presupposition for the good life.”¹⁰

Critical theory, then, is grounded in what Theodor Adorno calls, quite hyperbolically, as the ontology of the “wrong state of things,” whose very own theoretic-normative basis is a utopian image of the good life. Adorno announced that the only decent, by which he perhaps means earnest, way of confronting the reality of the wrong state of things¹¹ is not by promising that a good life is possible in a bad life, but, rather, “by making this situation a matter of consciousness—rather than covering it up with sticking plaster,” for only then would “it be possible to create the conditions in which we can properly formulate questions about how we should lead our lives today.”¹² In this context, the ontology of the wrong state of things functions as an eyewitness to the anomalous, that is, pathological formation of certain social relations that damage or contradict the utopian vision of a good life. As a disclosure of the wrong state of things, Critical Theory reveals that despite the fact that modern society promises ideal social configurations—i.e., institutions that secure social justice and freedom—these same social configurations could morph into new systematic ways of oppression, thereby defeating their very own purpose. Bringing the wrong state of things out in the open, we then subject our normative resources to scrutiny and revision.

Third, Critical Theory is also concerned with social normativity in the sense that socio-political “emancipation” can also be located in the very social practices that are common to us, e.g., communication (Habermas) or social recognition (Honneth). Social practices or experiences peculiar to a given society is the background upon which the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹¹ See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1999), 11.

¹² Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 167.

diagnosis of social pathology depends. Philosophy becomes a form of praxis or, as Honneth describes it, a “therapeutic self-critique,”¹³ by which he means the intention of social critical inquiry to expose the reality of “human suffering” so as to condition the necessity of social struggle or the struggle for recognition. Philosophy, for the critical theorists, is, on the one hand, a critique of socio-political normativity in order to guard normative practices from unnecessary hypostatization or reification and, on the other hand, an empowerment of socio-political normativity bent towards social emancipation.

Articulating Honneth’s Ethics of Recognition

Taking Habermas’ theory of communication as point of departure, Honneth considers the former’s tendency towards linguistic formalism and pragmatic proceduralism to be reductive and neglectful of some of the more intricate social dynamics of human intersubjective bonds. There is a conscious effort, notwithstanding the profound influence of Habermas’ intersubjective model, on the part of Honneth to go beyond the pragmatic-linguistic structure of social interaction. For Honneth, the normativity that undergirds the possibility of intersubjective understanding goes beyond the communicative model, as other equally important normative spheres of sociality also warrant consideration. There should be a keener receptivity to the affective and physical well-being of social groups, as well as a more accommodating stance towards their cultural identities and social roles. Honneth, then, revisits the Hegelian notion of the development of self-consciousness in order to articulate a post-communicative stance towards social interaction. As already mentioned above, the development of individual autonomy is seen as a material result of the normative structure of interaction with others. Failure to recognize this basic socio-ontological structure results in experiences of social injustice or, to say it in more precise terms, the misrecognition of the “self” or one’s social identity. Such experiences of injustice, Honneth claims, result from the thwarting of the abovementioned three spheres of social recognition: care, respect, and esteem.

As mentioned above, the three spheres of recognition is a response to the atomistic individual engendered by essentialist/foundationalist models of philosophical anthropology or, in the context of modernity, against the instrumental-rational assumptions concerning human individuality inaugurated by foundationist models. Above I have outlined Honneth’s shift from foundationalist philosophical anthropology to a materialist model, that is to say, a model grounded in the normativity of social interactions. By seeing individual autonomy as constituted by concrete social interactions, Honneth is able to argue that the moral maturity (ability to act as an ethical agent) of an individual depends

¹³ Honneth, *Disrespect*, 57.

on non-instrumental social relations; in the process, what emerges as a moral agent is someone who is not a self-interested and inert subject, but, rather, someone whose very autonomy depends on his recognitive relations with others, “where one’s formation as an ethical subject and agent is dependent on the responsiveness of others” with respect to the three spheres of recognition. In other words, human agency is understood as a concrete and direct effect of social interaction, as opposed to the archaic idea that morality is something that is begotten from without, that is, from some divine principle. On the contrary, human agency—constituted by care, respect, and esteem—result from ethical learning processes that the members of society have gradually acquired over many generations¹⁴; so, in this sense, we are able to speak about a “natural history” of morality, while avoiding moral naturalism. Let us now discuss, albeit in schematic form, the three spheres of recognition.

Care/Love

The sphere of care or love, Honneth remarks, “prepares the ground for a type of relation-to-self in which subjects mutually acquire basic confidence in themselves, it is both conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition.”¹⁵ What is key here is not simply that one recognizes the other’s independence, but, rather, that a somewhat primitive struggle for recognition is at play, for instance, between mother and child. Moreover, according to Honneth, it is not enough that, through this struggle, an acceptance of the child’s independence occurs, but that “this release into independence has to be supported by an affective confidence in the continuity of shared concern.”¹⁶ Care or love, then, is a concrete and continuous manifestation of recognition in addition to it being conceptually and genetically prior. As such, beyond the mother-child relation, the phenomenon of care/love extends, as the subject matures and widens his social field, to friends and lovers. To quote Honneth:

“Without the felt assurance that the loved one will continue to care even after he or she become independent, it would become impossible for the loving subject to recognize that independence. Because this experience must be mutual in love relationships, recognition is here characterized by a double process, in which the other is released and, at the same time, emotionally tied to the loving subject. Thus, in speaking of recognition as a constitutive element of love, what is meant is an affirmation of independence that is guided—indeed, supported—by care.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Cf. van den Brink and Owen, “Introduction,” in *Recognition and Power*, 09-10.

¹⁵ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

As the most basic form of recognition, care/love instills in the individual the idea of intimacy which grants him/her the physical and affective self-assurance which will serve as a basic guidance in his/her traversal of the natural and social world.

Respect

What is expected via respect is a self-relationship in which the subject sees himself/herself as worthy of respect, that is, as a mature and ethically responsible subject. In contradistinction to Kantian deontology which speaks of one's duty towards others as transcendentally prior by virtue of an other's essential dignity, respect, for Honneth, is grounded in a notion of universal dignity sanctioned by legal relations (as opposed to transcendent principles of dignity). In other words, against the backdrop of the normativity of legally-sanctioned assumptions, e.g., human rights, we owe each person the recognition of his/her ability to recognize and respect these normatively-sanctioned assumptions—not out of divine guilt, but, rather, out of his capacity to act rationally, that is, ethically. In anthropological terms, the upshot of respect is self-respect, wherein the autonomous subject is aware that he is the author of moral rules and, as such, should be guided by his own rules. Honneth asserts:

“What is meant in saying that a subject is capable of acting autonomously on the basis of rational insight is something that is determined only relative to an account of what it means to speak of rational agreement. . . . The determinations of the capacities that constitutively characterize a human being as a person is therefore dependent on background assumptions about the subjective prerequisites that enable participation in rational will-formation. The more demanding this procedure is seen to be, the more extensive the features will have to be that, taken together, constitute a subject's status as morally responsible. . . . The cumulative expansion of individual rights-claims, which is what we are dealing with in modern societies, can be understood as a process in which the scope of the general features of a morally responsible person has gradually increased, because, under the pressure for struggles for recognition, ever-new prerequisites for participation in rational will-formation have to be taken into consideration.”¹⁸

The relation between self-respect and recognition is understood normatively since the possession of rights “means being able to raise socially accepted claims” and, as such, one is provided “with a legitimate way of making clear to oneself that one is respected by everyone else.”¹⁹ Honneth, therefore, considers the importance of communicative rationality as propounded by Habermas, for, as a recognitive process, communication is able to

¹⁸ Ibid., 114-115.

¹⁹ Ibid., 120.

articulate and publicize ethical assumptions that are generally accepted by a community, thereby creating a public space for participative debate and deliberation. Within this field, participants are empowered inasmuch as they are being witnessed by interacting partners. Moreover, inasmuch as ethical autonomy (self-respect) is engendered by social-legal participation, the idea of “accountability” is also addressed.

Esteem

While the idea of respect or self-respect is one where the subject is able to view himself/herself as having equal status and treatment as everyone else, esteem involves a more substantive relation-to-self. What is granted in this sphere is the self-confidence of the subject that enables him/her to claim a place in a social community as a unique contributor. While self-respect grants “similarity” among subjects, self-esteem grants “individual difference” or “particularity.” What is recognized in this sphere is the subject’s unique traits and abilities that are not common to all, but are acknowledged and valued by all. In the words of Honneth:

“... social relations of symmetrical esteem between individualized (and autonomous) subjects represent a pre-requisite for solidarity. In this sense, to esteem one another symmetrically means to view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis. Relationships of this sort can be said to be cases of ‘solidarity,’ because they inspire not just passive tolerance but felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person.”²⁰

The development of self-esteem is the development of self-worth that undergirds one’s identity. In practical-normative terms, relations of esteem and solidarity are ideally found in the spheres of work or labour and in cultural groups. Note however that Honneth does not refer to work or labour here in functional terms, but, rather that the setup of the workplace makes possible the development of solidarity among the co-workers and self-esteem in the worker as a particular and important contributing agent in the workforce. Beyond the workplace, and for Honneth a more important sphere, is the sphere of the cultural. Honneth situates esteem within the fringes of a particular culture, thereby opening up this recognitive relation to a wider field. More precisely, cultural groups, inasmuch as they share common evaluative and normative resources, are also able to struggle for their recognition in a given society.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

Concluding Remarks

In the above reconstruction of Honneth's ethics of recognition, it was necessary to re-contextualize Critical Theory, as a potent evaluative tool in diagnosing society, within the socio-political deficit of philosophy in the Philippines. I am simply arguing that the way we do and teach philosophy suffers from a deficit in the prognosis of our normative resources as a group of philosophers, in particular, and as a nation in general. This deficit is primarily induced by our predisposition to the proverbial language of Scholastic metaphysics. I am also arguing that if we are receptive to change, then a reevaluation of the current state of philosophy in the Philippines should be attempted. Perhaps, Critical Theory, as I have outlined it above can offer us alternative philosophico-evaluative resources. This entails, first and foremost, a shift in our language, in the tone, and intention of our philosophizing. This shift, to be more precise, is a shift from a purely speculative-metaphysical stance to a theoretico-materialist-practical stance: a stance that is sensitive to social realities from within and not from without. Honneth's ethics of recognition offers us an alternative language in our attempt to understand the plight of the human being—from essentialism to normativity. Recognition theory decenters individual autonomy (atomistic, foundationalist) only to reconstitute it in more a realist-normative grounding.

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