

AXEL HONNETH

The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition
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Abstract: This review discusses Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, which is further developed in his book *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. All parts of *The I in We* will be discussed through the lens of Honneth's theory of intersubjectivity. The main task primarily consists in an exploration of the theoretical underpinnings and the evolution of Honneth's theory of recognition, initially found in Part I, "Hegelian Roots." Subsequently, a substantial analysis of *The I in We* in the chronological order will be performed, to situate the notion of recognition within a broader context of Honneth's text.

Keywords: recognition, Critical Theory, intersubjectivity, psychoanalysis, theory of justice

Introduction

In the realm of moral and social philosophy, Axel Honneth's research facilitates certain concepts, which are exceedingly examined amount to his lifework. Honneth's oeuvre was inspired by his personal youth experience, which, being a powerful transformative force, had set up



the philosopher for a consistent reflection on a very particular aspect of human actions.

Axel Honneth grew up in the Ruhr Area, an industrial centre, which was affected by various socio-political and economic factors of post-war Germany. In the sphere of education, the political changes were manifested in integrating working-class children in secondary school with its classical curriculum. As a result, children faced a fate different from their parents', and a new social stratum started to take shape. Coming from a middle-class family, Honneth was exposed to the contrasting economic realities of his peers, which marked the conception of his theory of intersubjectivity. Honneth's work, developed at institutions like Columbia University, the Institute for Social Research¹, and Goethe University Frankfurt, maintained the theoretical core of intersubjective relations and different phenomena related to it. Some crucial aspects of the theory of intersubjectivity include the notions of recognition (misrecognition and nonrecognition), respect (disrespect), power, conflict, reason, rational thought, distribution, and justice. His main treatises dedicated to the theory of intersubjectivity feature *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (2000), *Freedom's Right* (2014), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (1992), *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, co-authored with Nancy Fraser (2003), and, of course, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (2012).

The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition is not the first book or body of work in which Honneth explores the notion of recognition. However, one can argue that here Honneth covers eminently distinctive realms, the amplitude in which the notion of recognition appears in two different areas of human existence. On the one hand, he considers interpersonal relationships, childhood, being part of the nation-state and the group, rational and irrational decision-making process; and on the other – scientific disciplines such as sociology, psychoanalysis, political science, philosophy, in which this concept is portrayed as a relevant topic of research. The decision to organize *The I in We* in a manner explained above is reflected in its contents. Part I, "Hegelian Roots", adopts a philosophic-theoretical approach to retrace the notion of recognition in Hegel's oeuvre and consists of two chapters. Part II, "Systematic Consequences", is the least systematic section of *The I in We*. Here, in four chapters, Honneth delves into the theories of justice to show their drawbacks; he rethinks the notion of labour and its relation to recognition, presents ideological and real workings of recognition, and reviews two theories from sociology and social philosophy by David Miller, Luc Boltanski, and Laurent Thévenot.

1 Institutional home of the Frankfurt School. Honneth was its director from 2001 to 2018.

Part III, “Social and Theoretical Applications”, examines, in three chapters, how recognition is manifested or invoked in individual, social, and political contexts. Part IV, “Psychoanalytic Ramifications”, with its four chapters, primarily focuses on the relation between Critical Theory and psychoanalysis.

In this review, I will discuss all the parts of *The I in We* through the lens of Honneth’s notion of recognition. I will begin by delving into theoretical underpinnings and the evolution of Honneth’s theory of recognition, primarily found in Part I, “Hegelian Roots”. Subsequently, I will perform a substantial analysis of *The I in We* in chronological order.

Recognition and Part I, “Hegelian Roots”

According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary (2024), the notion of recognition has two meanings, which branch out to two opposing directions. The first meaning of the notion of recognition is an “identification of someone or something or person from previous encounters or knowledge”, its synonyms include “recollection”, “recall”, and “remembrance”. The second meaning refers to “acknowledgement of the existence, validity, or legality of something” and is synonymous to “acceptance”, “admission” and “awareness”. The difficulty of seeing recognition as a transparent act arises also in juggling different languages, which, according to Honneth (2012) contributes to conceptual unclarity, as (p. 79)

it also becomes more apparent than ever that the concept of recognition encompasses semantic components that differ in English, French and German usage, and that the relation between these various components is not especially transparent. In German, the concept essentially indicates only the normative act of according positive social worth, while the English and French usage also encompasses the epistemic senses of identifying or recalling something. An additional difficulty consists in the fact that in all three languages, the concept can be used to indicate speech acts in which one admits or acknowledges a point, in which case ‘recognition’ has a primarily self-referential sense.

Therefore, before embarking on the fields such as international, communal, or interpersonal relationships, it is crucial to grasp the central concept of Honnethian theory. However, obtaining a comprehensive view solely from *The I in We* is challenging for two reasons: (i) it lacks essential components – introduction and conclusion – that are crucial to see the themes *in unity*; (ii) it does not offer a summary

of the notion of recognition found elsewhere in Honnethian oeuvre. Consequently, it is difficult to envision this concept empirically as a consistent part of everyday existence based only on *The I in We*. To remain faithful to the academic review genre, I will try to retrace the conceptual core of recognition exclusively from the content provided in this book.

In Part I, Honneth presents the importance of the theoretical notion of recognition in Hegel's oeuvre, following his explanation of its treatment in the Hegelian corpus in the Preface (p. vii–viii)

[w]hereas in *The Struggle for Recognition* I had still assumed that only Hegel's Jena lectures contained coherent elements of a theory of recognition, after more intensive study of his mature writings I came to realize how wrong I had been. I no longer believe that Hegel sacrificed his initial intersubjectivism in the course of developing a monological concept of spirit; rather, Hegel sought throughout his life to interpret objective spirit, i.e. social reality, as a set of layered relations of recognition. On the basis of this reassessment I sought to make Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* fruitful for the development of a theory of recognition.

I will examine this move after having explained the interpersonal aspect of recognition laid out in Hegel's magnum opus *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. In "From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Grounding of Self-Consciousness", Honneth traces the journey from desire to recognition, an obligatory process for achieving personal self-realization and autonomy. In simpler terms, Honneth invokes Hegel's idea found in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, which illustrates the transition from a "human animal" to a "rational subject" (p. 8). This progression has to be contemplated with the notion of 'Life' as a backdrop (p. 8)

the individual cannot avoid having two simultaneous realizations. It observes that the world it has constructed is a totality, preserved through permanent transformation, i.e. a totality of genii whose generic qualities are constantly reproduced through the life cycle of its individual members. 'It is the whole round of this activity that constitutes Life... the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself'.

An individual becomes both the creator and the subject of 'Life'. Unlike in Kantian or Fichtian theories, individual self-consciousness not only sees itself as "the activity by which consciousness merely observes itself", but also experiences its "active, synthesizing side of consciousness" (p. 9). Desire, the primary stage of arriving to self-consciousness is initially an egocentric stance. The individual feels its

power impact on the surroundings – one might call it unregulated omnipotence. However, to be able to arrive at being-for-itself, i.e. self-consciousness, one must “enter into a relationship of ‘recognition’ with another subject” (p. 4). This path from desire, omnipotence, to self-consciousness presupposes the other in whom one finds “being which, through an act of self-restriction, makes the subject aware of its own ‘ontological’ dependency” (p. 14). This mutual intertwinement represents what Hegel and Honneth label as recognition. Identifying both the other and oneself through the act of recognition integrates the subject into human genus, as its particularity and uniqueness is the ability to recognize and thus emerge from the “self-referentiality of mere desire and become aware of its dependence on its fellow subjects” (p. 4). Thus, this argumentation aligns with the second definition of recognition introduced at the beginning of this chapter – recognition as “acknowledgement of the existence, validity, or legality of something”. How does this technical language translate into empirical life? Exploring the theories presented in *The I in We*, we can find the answer in Part II, chapter 5, “Recognition as Ideology: The Connection between Morality and Power”. First, Honneth conceptualizes recognition as a representation of a “moral act anchored in social world as an everyday occurrence” (p. 80). The notion of “moral act” signifies ethical normativity, i.e., a specific set of rules or obligations for living a good life. Attaining the hope of a good life involves immersing oneself in social relations to cultivate self-respect, self-confidence, and self-esteem, ultimately leading to the formation of an autonomous subject. Here, Honneth’s re-evaluation of *Phenomenology* starts to take a more comprehensive shape. “Everyday occurrence” shows how the network of cooperation, mutual correspondence, influence on one another happens constantly and – usually – unconsciously. Second, Honneth displays four premises in which the act of recognizing occurs: (i) “affirmation of positive qualities of human subjects or groups” (p. 80); (ii) recognition is not only about the verbal or symbolic way to affirm others’ qualities “because only the corresponding modes of comportment can produce the credibility so normatively significant for the recognized subject. Insofar as we limit ourselves to intersubjective relationships, we should speak of recognition as a ‘stance’ (*Haltung*), i.e. as an attitude in concrete action” (p. 80); (iii) recognition must be planned and deliberated: “[w]hether they be gestures, speech acts, or institutional policies, such expressions or measures always represent acts of recognition inasmuch as their primary purpose is to affirm the existence of another person or group. This basic conceptual determination rules out, for example, defining positive attitudes that are inevitably accompanied by other interests in interaction as being form of recognition” (p. 80); (iv) “recognition represents a conceptual species comprising a number of various sub-species. ‘Stances’ of love,

legal respect and esteem thus accentuate and display various aspects of the basic attitude we understand generically as recognition” (p. 80). In sum, to recognize is to (i) affirm positive qualities of others, invoking recognition as a (iii) deliberate (ii) stance that might (iv) manifest itself in different ways, e.g., by loving. However, this serves as an indicative framework only, and it does not suggest a monological vision of ways to recognize or be recognized. Yet, this indication is essential for the further study of *The I in We*, in which Honneth explores the notion of recognition in various ways. Therefore, maintaining an understanding of this unifying factor is crucial for comprehending the theoretical deliberations in the upcoming parts.

Going back to part I, chapter titled “The Realm of Actualized Freedom: Hegel’s Notion of a ‘Philosophy of Right’”, one can see that Honneth is making a concerted effort to redeem Hegel’s notion of recognition as a natural component of the political theory. According to *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel’s venture into political science, individual freedom is attainable only “by being ‘with itself’ in this ‘other’ in such a way that it experiences the other’s characteristics or particularities as something with which it can identify” (p. 22). Thus, this notion stands in stark contrast to contemporary attempts to formulate views on liberty or freedom. Contemporary uses of freedom do not presuppose political community. The main objective is to, almost in a child-like manner, exercise a prerogative to speak, consume, organize one’s life despite anything, unless the consequences inflict harm on the agent or their immediate network, which gradually shrinks in quantity and moves to the private sphere. Hegel proclaims that “free will is a ‘will which wills the free will’”, yet this freedom ought to be realized by invoking a tripartite distinction of family, civil society, and the state, which have a “specific role in the actualization of social freedom” (p. 29). According to Honneth, these three spheres are the “embodiments of different forms of reciprocal recognition” (p. 29), meaning, that such human qualities as subjective capacities, social roles, material fulfilment are “guarded” by this quality that is in succession of every step of the way for the individual.

Part II, “Systematic Consequences”

From the information presented in *The I in We*, I have reconstructed the notion of recognition as a concept of Honnethian theory of intersubjectivity. In particular, I have demonstrated its roots in Hegelian theory (Jena period, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, *Philosophy of Right*) and outlined its definition and four premises of emergence. This relatively exhaustive analysis of recognition has been performed to obtain a general outlook on how recognition is treated by Honneth in

different realms of analysis. A clearer definition is instrumental in exploring five chapters of part II of *The I in We*, as it is the most convoluted and unsystematic part, in which Honneth attempts to analyze the politico-public arena and its relation to recognition. In my view, chapters 3, 4, and 5 are the most theoretically fruitful, whereas chapters 6 and 7 that examine the theories of Luc Boltanski, Laurent Thévenot and David Miller do not include the reflection on recognition² and distract the main intention of *The I in We*, which, in my opinion, is the examination of recognition in a different light with different methods.

In Chapter 3, “The Fabric of Justice: On the Limits of Contemporary Proceduralism”, the initial focus is on reflecting alienation from normativity. Honneth was “philosophically processed” by the tradition, represented by his teacher Habermas, who valued democratic principles of deliberation. Furthermore, this tradition, in collaboration with Rawls, who advocates the capacity of human beings to reach an impartial agreement, is grounded in the power of reason(-ing). Setting himself apart from his theoretical beginnings, Honneth contends that the aforementioned theories of justice discourage individuals and communities from political participation. The author attributes this to the flawed treatment of justice through the invocation of the distribution of goods schema. Honneth shifts the perception of justice by stating that justice should ensure not the portion of (material) goods attributed to a person, but realization of individual autonomy. Individual autonomy is facilitated by various agents: work, family, state, etc., in a way it was briefly sketched in Hegel’s theory in *Philosophy of Right*. Yet, since the state is the sole guarantor of the distribution schema, we encounter a problem here. Autonomy, born out of recognition, is an interpersonal and intersubjective result: “we do not acquire autonomy on our own, but only in relation to other people who are willing to appreciate us, just as we must be able to appreciate them” (p. 41). The state cannot penetrate those areas in which we perform recognition and are being recognized. The schema of distribution, belonging to proceduralist action, presupposes that people that take part in it are autonomous, yet it precludes the formation of autonomous subject. Thus, Honneth skilfully demonstrates the dead-end of the theory of (movable goods) distribution.

Chapter 4, “Labour and Recognition: A Redefinition”, speaks about blindness of Critical Theory and sociology. Namely, its stance of having forgotten the notion of labour and a vast majority of what

2 In Boltanski’s and Thévenot’s article, the notion of recognition was mentioned 2 times without providing its further elaboration. Miller invokes recognition only once, yet this term was mentioned as “worthy of further examination”. Both theories engage in extensive criticism of the theories of distribution and rational thought.

it entails – fight for better material conditions, being recognized as doing something worthwhile, the toll of unemployment, etc. According to Honneth: “the hardships of all those who not only fear losing their jobs, but are also concerned about the quality of their jobs, no longer resonate in the vocabulary of a critical theory of society” (p. 58). Here Honneth draws criticism to his field, yet the situation in popular discourse is much grimmer. One example that springs to mind is the teachers’ strike in Lithuania, where both society and the government failed to recognize the strikers’ desire for fair compensation and acknowledgement of their socially essential role. If we agree with the premise that the market can be seen as a part of social life world, workers who do not produce palpable added value are vulnerable to economic pressures.

In my opinion, chapter 5, “Recognition as Ideology: The Connection between Morality and Power”, provides the most insightful analysis in part III. It presents a useful distinction between real and ideological methods of performing recognition. To illustrate these approaches, Honneth had to provide a condensed version of “real” recognition in contrast to the ideological one. This simplifies the process of navigating through the conceptual jungle in pinpointing the core of recognition. In the previous chapter I have laid out Honneth’s four preconditions, and now I will add his view that recognition should aim to affirm another person, group, and such recognitional behaviour is “unambiguously positive, because they permit the addressee to identify with his or her own qualities and thus to achieve a greater degree of autonomy” (p. 81). Honneth here converses with Louis Althusser, who claims that the contemporary Western culture is able to produce only ideological forms of recognition. There is no way to break free from the existing currents of economic, cultural, religious, and moral features that make up the face of ideology. However, Honneth refuses to accept this surrender and endeavours to guide the reader towards a broader understanding of how genuine recognition is practiced by individuals, communities, and institutions.

Part III, “Social and Theoretical Applications”

Part III seeks to operationalize recognition, with Honneth interweaving recognition in various theories across different topics, in which the main subject of this book is continuously tested. Beginning with chapter 8, “Recognition between States: On the Moral Substrate of International Relations”, Honneth boldly endeavours to withdraw recognition from solely interpersonal or group relationships and aims to demonstrate its applicability to the international arena, namely, the recognition between states. To recognize someone, one must invoke

personal abilities such as attentiveness, respect, listening, etc. How is it possible for a state to possess such an ability, where, as broadly understood, it is only a territory considered as a political community under a government, and not a living, feeling entity? Honneth yet again invokes Hegel to “return to a stronger moral vocabulary in analysing the comportment of collective agents and social groups, thereby extracting this behaviour from the dominant paradigm of purely purpose-rational, strategic action” (p. 137). States ought to assert themselves, gain recognition in the international arena and be subject to the same international laws. The problem of a state possessing human-like faculties is solved by seeing a state as a “behaviour of social groups or movements.”³ For individuals or communities living in a state that has not faced struggles for a long period of time, such theory might seem rather far-fetched, unnecessary, or counter-intuitive. Yet, in contemporary times, there are plenty of examples where recognition is either misplaced or withheld. Take, for instance, the infamous theory, in this case promoted by journalist Bob Ryan (2023) in *The Times of Israel*, denying the existence of Palestinian people, claiming that they are historically radicalized Arabs whose desire to create a state was concocted by the KGB. This view is still prevalent today, where a political community is regarded as inauthentic and incapable of self-determination. Consequently, for some, there is nothing to recognize. On the other hand, such theory might fall prey to its treatment as a monolithic entity. Being comprised of different groups and communities, which at times work against each other, the state cannot consistently request recognition from others, as it grapples with internal tension and evolving identity.

Chapter 9, “Organized Self-Realization: Paradoxes of Individualization”, returns to the individual dimension, which is examined in the context of socio-economic environment. Honneth invokes two terms from sociology – rationalization and individualization – and contemplates how they have become affected by the neoliberal regime. Self-realization, which includes an extraordinary career (entrepreneurship), hobbies that are tailored to one’s authentic personality, flexibility in the market, freedom in social and romantic relationships have become an obligation in a society full of yet-to-be extraordinary people. While it might initially seem as a blessing, Honneth opposes such view by stating that this constant need and requirement to be extraordinary and authentic is nothing more than an “ideology and productive force in a deregulated economic system” (p. 165), which, in turn, shapes into a psychologically overwhelming duty. The notion of recognition in

3 Honneth has demonstrated beforehand how recognition can be applied not only from a person to a person, but from a group to a group, from an institution to an individual, etc. See part 2 and part 4 in *The I in We*.

such circumstances might only take a form of ideological recognition, mentioned in part 2, chapter 5. There is little that comes authentically and directly from an individual. The last chapter of part 3, “Paradoxes of Capitalist Modernization: A Research Programme”, follows directly from the ideas presented in chapter 9. Honneth argues that while many positive aspects (such as socioeconomic and cultural transformations, expansion of subjective rights and legal equality, modern achievement principle, more freedom to intimate relationships) have been achieved or have progressed, they become embedded in shareholder value-oriented capitalism, losing their original principles and becoming decontaminated from their radicalism. They end up in a paradoxical situation where they are granted the right to exist but, in a way, it is convenient for a broader schema of economic expansion. As a result, the ideological recognition, as discussed in chapter 5, begins to dominate the practice of recognition, making it increasingly challenging to distinguish between “real” and “ideological” forms of recognition.

Part IV, “Psychoanalytic Ramifications”

Part IV of *The I in We* serves as Honneth’s tribute to psychoanalysis, which, in one form or another, is prevalent in Critical Theory. This part has a two-fold direction: (i) it rethinks the relation between psychoanalysis and Critical Theory (chapter 11) or reworks some of its concepts in light of Critical Theory (chapter 14); (ii) it examines recognitional stances in social atmosphere, i.e., group formation, and relationship with caregivers (chapter 12 and 13).

In my opinion, chapter 11, “The Work of Negativity: A Recognition-Theoretical Revision of Psychoanalysis”, might be better suited for a different body of work, e.g., the one where the proponents of Critical Theory are “having it out” in which direction they aspire to apply various psychoanalytical principles. In this chapter, Honneth contemplates Critical Theory’s dependency on psychoanalysis, Critical Theory’s turn to object relations, and the potential pitfalls of removing negativity that might result in pairing CT with object relations theory. This is but a carcass that needs to be made more elusive in such theories where there is argument in which way CT would like to proceed. Thus, we have a problem of the theory on (theoretical) form and method being smuggled into the theory on a particular object, i.e., recognition. Similarly, even though chapter 14 rethinks a particular issue – turning from the naturalistic onto-primitivisation attitude in the face of grief, Honneth, by introducing transitional objects, tries to diminish Freud’s view, which states that an individual, possessed by grief, succumbs to regression. Here, however, Honneth, like in chapter 11, tries to situate which psychoanalytic theory is more in accordance

with the values of CT, while the notion of grief becomes a victim in this competition and, in my opinion, does not further the study on recognition.

However, perhaps to compensate, chapters 12 and 13 truly engage with the notion of recognition. Chapter 12, “The I in We: Recognition as a Driving Force of Group Formation”, examines how autonomy develops through exposure to various forms of recognition from the parents, friends, groups, etc. Honneth challenges the idea that being in a group is solely a “result of a drive to compensate for a weak ego” (p. 202), as suggested by orthodox psychoanalysis. Instead, he argues that it reflects the need to be “dependent on forms of social recognition imbued with direct encouragement and affirmation” (p. 214). In chapter 13, Honneth engages with Joel Whitebook’s theory on pre-social self, which consists of ineradicable negativity. In other words, Whitebook, drawing on Hobbes, Henrick and Freud, argues that Critical Theory does not consider the non-conformism of the individual subject, which precludes them from forming positive values through recognition. Honneth challenges most of Whitebook’s arguments, and suggests that all of the findings, including primitive expressions of anger and hostility, can be reconciled with recognitional stances.

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