

RECOGNITION. REFLECTIONS ON A CONTESTED CONCEPT

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Abstract. *In recent years the term ‘recognition’ has been used in ever more variegated theoretical contexts. This article contributes to the discussion of how the concept expressed by this term should be explicated and understood. For the most part it takes the concept itself as its topic rather than making theoretical use of it. Drawing on important work by Ikäheimo and Laitinen and taking Honneth’s tripartite division of recognition into love, respect, and esteem as a starting point, I introduce the conceptual distinction between recognitive attitudes, recognitive relations, and recognitive acts, discuss Brandom’s attempt at explaining self-consciousness in terms of reflexive recognition mediated by intersubjective recognitive relations and, finally, suggest some critical points on how Butler puts the concept of recognition to work in her approach to ethics.*

1. Introduction

The term ‘recognition’ (*Anerkennung*) has been used extensively and in ever more diverse contexts in recent years¹. It figures importantly in the expression of various contemporary theories of social and political justice², in social ontology³, in normative

¹ For a comprehensive overview of how ‘recognition’ is being used in contemporary philosophical debates see H.-C. SCHMIDT AM BUSCH, Ch.F. ZURN (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Maryland 2010. For critical perspectives on recognition see P. MARKELL, *Bound by Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003; L. MCNAY, *Against Recognition*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008.

² A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, transl. by J. Anderson, Polity Press, Cambridge 1995 (*Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1992); N. FRASER, A. HONNETH, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Verso, London, New York 2003; B. VAN DEN BRINK, D. OWEN (eds.), *Recognition and Power. Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007.

³ H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN (eds.), *Recognition and Social Ontology*, Brill, Leiden 2011.

ethics and in debates on (personal as well as collective) identity⁴, in attempts at explaining self-consciousness⁵, in gender theories⁶, and in psychoanalysis⁷. So the theoretical workload that the concept of recognition is expected to be able to carry is considerable – and one might wonder whether it is so much as possible for a single concept to play such variegated systematic roles.

In what follows I will not directly engage in any of the debates just mentioned, that is, I will not use the concept of recognition for theoretical purposes. Rather, I want to contribute to a line of discussion that has recently gained momentum thanks to, above all, Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen and which concerns the concept of recognition itself – the question of how it should best be understood and explicated. The second section, after briefly rehearsing the central theses of Axel Honneth's recognition theory of social conflicts and personal identity, introduces some of the conceptual and meta-theoretical distinctions proposed by Ikäheimo and Laitinen. In the third section I highlight two Hegelian claims which seem to have become common ground among some of the most influential contemporary conceptions of recognition – the claim that recognition is to be thought of as an intrinsically reciprocal relation and the thesis that self-consciousness and personal identity have to be understood as

⁴ H. IKÄHEIMO, *Making the Best of What We Are: Recognition as an Ontological and Ethical Concept*, in H.-CH. SCHMIDT AM BUSCH, Ch.F. ZURN (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition*, cit., pp. 343-367.

⁵ R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition. Self-Consciousness and Self-Constitution*, «Philosophy & Social Criticism», XXXIII (1), 2007, pp. 127-150, here p. 137.

⁶ J. BUTLER, *Undoing Gender*, Routledge, New York 2004; P. PURTSCHERT, *Anerkennung als Kampf um Repräsentation. Hegel lesen mit Simone de Beauvoir und Frantz Fanon*, «Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie», LVI (6), 2008, pp. 923-933.

⁷ J. BENJAMIN, *Like Subjects, Love Objects. Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1995; J. BENJAMIN, *Shadow of the Other. Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York 1998; M. ALTMEYER, *Im Spiegel des Anderen. Anwendungen einer relationalen Psychoanalyse*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gießen 2003. For discussions of recognition in psychoanalytic contexts see J. BUTLER, *Longing for Recognition. Commentary on the Work of Jessica Benjamin*, «Studies in Gender and Sexuality», I (3), 2000, pp. 271-290, A. Wildt, «Recognition» in Psychoanalysis, in H.-C. SCHMIDT AM BUSCH, Ch. F. ZURN (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition*, cit., pp. 189-209.

socially constituted by recognitive relations. A caveat is in place at this point: I will speak of recognition as a condition of both self-consciousness and personal identity without paying much attention to keeping these two points separate. While I think that there are good reasons not only for keeping them apart but for treating the first as more basic than the second (and as more demanding in terms of what would count as a justification) nothing in what follows depends on this distinction. So for present purposes I will follow other authors in the debate and treat the two theses as inseparably blending into each other⁸. In the fourth section I propose an answer to the question of how recognition relations, recognitive attitudes, and recognitive acts interconnect. The fifth section approaches recognition from a semi-formal point of view, focusing on a number of properties (symmetry, reflexivity, and transitivity) which have been ascribed to recognitive relations in recent debates. I do not claim that this is the only or the best way to approach the question of how to explicate the concept of recognition, only that it is a theoretically rewarding one. The final section critically relates some of the points that will emerge from sections two to five to the way in which Judith Butler applies the concept of recognition to the contexts of bodily existence and social norms in *Giving an Account of Oneself*⁹.

2. *Recognition Relations and Recognitive Attitudes*

When used in the contexts of ethics, social theory or political philosophy, the expression 'recognition' bears normative and affirmative connotations. On the face of it, it would seem to belong to a semantic field which, among others, contains such terms as 'appreciation', 'respect', 'responsibility', 'love', 'esteem', 'care', and 'tolerance'. These terms, of course, are used to express different concepts, and the differences between the concepts

⁸ See, for example, A. HONNETH, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, «Social Research», LXIV (1), 1997, pp. 16-35.

⁹ J. BUTLER, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Fordham University Press, New York 2005.

expressed by them are, in some cases, quite subtle. Hegel introduces *Anerkennung* as a normative and intersubjective relation which can obtain between two persons *a* and *b* only if they bring it about by mutual, reciprocal and – in a sense to be explained – *matching* cognitive acts¹⁰. For Hegel, then, it cannot be the case that *a* recognizes *b* unless *b* recognizes *a* and *vice versa*. I will return to this reciprocity constraint on recognition. What is important at this point is that *one* way to distinguish the concept of *Anerkennung* from the concepts expressed by the other terms mentioned above would be to insist, with Hegel, on the strictly reciprocal structure of recognition: whilst there can be unilateral respect, esteem, love, care, appreciation, responsibility, and tolerance between some person, *a*, and some other person, *b*, there cannot be unilateral recognition between *a* and *b*. However, this attractively simple construal of what distinguishes recognition from the other phenomena just mentioned meets with difficulties once we try to relate it to what, arguably, is the most elaborated and sophisticated conception of recognition available today, namely Axel Honneth's. In order to see why, it is necessary to take a quick look at Honneth's theory.

According to Honneth, the concept of recognition is a powerful explanatory tool not only for understanding and analysing the roots, causes, reasons and motivations of a wide variety of social and political conflicts – Honneth would even claim of social and political conflicts quite generally – but for identifying morally legitimate strategies for the resolution of those conflicts as well: «It is by way of the morally motivated struggles of social groups – their collective attempt to establish, institutionally and culturally, expanded forms of recognition – that the normatively directional change of societies proceeds»¹¹. While this passage

¹⁰ See, for instance, G.W.F. HEGEL, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, §§177-178.

¹¹ A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition*, cit., p. 93. For a brief but useful survey of the various respects in which Honneth has modified and developed his recognition theory of social conflict since the publication of *The Struggle for Recognition* see C.-G. HEIDEGREN, *Recognition: A Theory of the Middle?*, in D. PETHERBRIDGE (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays. With a Reply by Axel Honneth*, Brill, Leiden and Boston 2011, pp. 233-253, here pp. 234-237.

introduces social groups or collectives as the main actors in struggles for recognition, another important component of Honneth's theory is the thought that individual human beings depend on intersubjective recognition relations for the constitution, formation and maintenance of their personal identities – that «they owe their identity to the construction of a practical self-relation that is, from the beginning, dependent upon the help and affirmation of other human beings»¹². As is well known, Honneth traces this thesis back to Hegel: «[W]ith Hegel, I take it for granted that human beings need the experience of recognition in order to relate to their capabilities and potentials in a way that permits a free, uncoerced realization of their personality»¹³.

Introducing the concept of recognition *via negationis*, i.e. by way of a phenomenology of moral injuries – interpreted in terms of withheld or denied recognition (*Missachtung*)¹⁴ – Honneth distinguishes «three independent modes of recognition»¹⁵: love, moral and legal respect, and esteem¹⁶. To each of these modes or forms of recognition corresponds, on Honneth's view, a specific type of reflexive affirmation that individuals can only achieve by entering in recognitive relations with others. The experienced affirmations, then, are assumed to translate into, and to nurture, positive self-relations, i.e. specific kinds of reflexive recognition which allow individuals to develop, elaborate and maintain personal identities: «basic self-confidence» in the sphere of intimate relationships of love and friendship, «self-respect» in the sphere

¹² A. HONNETH, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, cit., pp. 27-28.

¹³ A. HONNETH, *Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions*, «Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy», XLV (4), 2002, pp. 499-519, here pp. 514-515.

¹⁴ See, for instance, A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition*, cit., chapter 6; A. HONNETH, *Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition*, «Political Theory», XX (2), 1992, pp. 187-201; A. HONNETH, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, cit., pp. 22-27.

¹⁵ A. HONNETH, *Recognition and Moral Obligation*, cit., p. 29.

¹⁶ See, for instance, A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition*, cit., p. 169, and A. HONNETH, *Grounding Recognition*, cit., p. 506.

of moral and legal relations, and «self-esteem» in the sphere of socially valued achievements¹⁷.

This short, and admittedly rough, reconstruction of Honneth's central theses is sufficient for present purposes. Let me return to the point made at the outset of this section. As anticipated above, the proposed distinction, in terms of a reciprocity constraint, between recognition and other affirmative interpersonal phenomena such as appreciation, tolerance, esteem etc. runs into difficulties when we try to relate it to Honneth's tripartite categorization of recognition into love, respect and esteem. Honneth thinks of love, respect, and esteem as *forms* or *types* of recognition. If this view is correct, however, then either it has to be admitted, contrary to the reciprocity constraint on recognition, that there *can*, after all, be unilateral (non-reciprocal) recognition or it has to be held, contrary to experience, that love, respect, and esteem *cannot* be unilateral. Either way the proposed distinction of *Anerkennung* from these other phenomena seems to collapse.

In order to resolve this problem – a problem that all who subscribe to Hegel's reciprocity constraint on recognition have to confront – we can take up a couple of important conceptual suggestions made by Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen. The first one, introduced by Ikäheimo in his article *On the Genus and Species of Recognition*, is to clearly distinguish recognitive attitudes from recognition relations¹⁸. Interpreting Ikäheimo's suggestion: recognitive attitudes are to be construed as affirmative stances that one person can take (or find herself to be taking) towards another, e.g. one of the three pro-attitudes of love, respect, and esteem emphasized in Honneth's theory. More generally, an attitude or stance (*habitus*) qualifies as recognitive only if it is capable of contributing, when occurring in suitably reciprocal and intersubjective constellations, to the constitution of recognition. Recognition itself, on the other hand, is not an attitude but a

¹⁷ A. HONNETH, *The Struggle for Recognition*, cit., p. 129; see also A. HONNETH, *Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser*, in N. FRASER, A. HONNETH, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, cit., pp. 110-197, here pp. 138-150.

¹⁸ H. IKÄHEIMO, *On the Genus and Species of Recognition*, «Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy», XLV (4), 2002, pp. 447-462, here p. 450.

normative relation that emerges from (or supervenes upon) matching and reciprocal affirmative (pro-)attitudes between persons. To appreciate how Ikäheimo's distinction can be put to work in separating recognition as an intrinsically *reciprocal* relation from pro-attitudes which can be merely one-way it is best to use an example. Taking into consideration a familiar use of the verb 'to love', it can so happen that someone, *a*, loves someone else, *b*, while *b* does not love *a*. *A* holds a specific pro-attitude (love) toward *b* but *b* does not reciprocate. If we take recognition to be an intrinsically reciprocal relation between persons, then clearly there is no recognition relation between *a* and *b* – at any rate, there is no cognitive relation which involves *a*'s loving *b* as a constitutive element. (*A* and *b* might, of course, be the relata of *other* cognitive relations.) What, then, does *a*'s loving *b* amount to if it fails to establish a recognition relation? Well, it amounts to just that: an unreciprocated cognitive stance, a one-way pro-attitude held by *a* and directed at *b* which is insufficient for establishing a recognition relation between them.

The second conceptual suggestion introduced by Ikäheimo – and elaborated in an article co-authored by Ikäheimo and Laitinen – that is important for telling the difference between recognition and pro-attitudes like love, tolerance or appreciation does not directly concern recognition and cognitive attitudes. Rather, it concerns theories and approaches which aim at clarifying and explaining these phenomena. It is the distinction between «recognizee-insensitive», «recognizee-sensitive», and «recognizee-centered» conceptions of recognition¹⁹. Assume that *a* holds some cognitive attitude *V* toward *b*. Recognizee-insensitive conceptions treat *a*'s holding *V* toward *b* as sufficient for establishing and maintaining a recognition relation between *a* and *b*. According to conceptions of this type, recognition can be brought about by one-way cognitive attitudes. Anyone holding a recognizee-insensitive conception is, therefore, committed to *denying* that recognition is a relation the obtaining of which depends upon the existence of reciprocal cognitive attitudes between persons. Accordingly, a conception of recognition is

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 450 and p. 460, note 5.

recognizee-sensitive if it takes *a*'s holding *V* toward *b* to be insufficient for establishing a relation of recognition between *a* and *b*. Conceptions of this kind make the obtaining of recognition relations depend upon whether *b* reciprocates and responds to *a*'s recognitive attitude toward herself in some suitable way – on Ikäheimo and Laitinen's conception, upon whether or not *b* takes *a* to be «a relevant judge»²⁰ or a «competent recognizer»²¹ with respect to the quality that *a*, in virtue his recognitive attitude *V* toward *b*, takes *b* to instantiate. According to the (recognizee-sensitive) conception proposed by Ikäheimo and Laitinen recognition is to be construed as a «two-way-complex-of-attitudes»²², more precisely, as a «two-way complex of recognitive attitudes»²³. Honneth has explicitly accepted Ikäheimo and Laitinen's explication of recognition: «[R]ecognition is to be conceived of as the genus comprised of three forms of practical attitudes, each reflecting the primary aim of a certain affirmation of the other»²⁴.

Finally, a conception of recognition is recognizee-centered if, for there to be a recognition relation between *a* and *b*, it takes it to be sufficient that *b* believes or thinks that *a* holds some recognitive attitude toward herself. Imagined recognitive attitudes, on this view, can bring about real recognition relations. Probably no-one has ever really held a recognizee-centered conception of recognition to be correct. However, both the case of merely imagined recognition by imagined others and the case of merely imagined recognition by actual and concrete others might be important to take into account when trying to understand the motivations of social movements and individual struggles for recognition – important to take into account not as something which constitutes actual recognitive relations here and now, but

²⁰ Ivi, pp. 451-452.

²¹ H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes Towards Persons*, B. VAN DEN BRINK, D. OWEN (eds.), *Recognition and Power*, cit., pp. 33-56, here p. 38, see also p. 47.

²² H. IKÄHEIMO, *On the Genus and Species of Recognition*, cit., p. 450.

²³ H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition*, cit., p. 38.

²⁴ A. HONNETH, *Grounding Recognition*, cit., p. 506.

as something which can help in thinking, creating and shaping new ones²⁵.

In their article *Analyzing Recognition* Ikäheimo and Laitinen complement the distinction between recognizee-sensitive, recognizee-insensitive and recognizee-centered conceptions of recognition with a differentiation between «monological» and «dialogical» conceptions²⁶. The latter distinction is intended to operate on a more general level than the former, such that monological conceptions comprise conceptions of recognition that are either recognizee-insensitive or recognizee-centered while the expression ‘dialogical conceptions’ is meant to cover recognizee-sensitive recognition.

To sum up: the distinction between cognitive relations and cognitive attitudes allows proponents of a dialogical (recognizee-sensitive) conception of recognition to account for the fact that persons can hold certain affirmative attitudes toward other persons without thereby automatically establishing cognitive relations. Cognitive attitudes fall short of establishing recognition relations whenever they are not reciprocated in the right ways. The reciprocity condition which is the basis of dialogical conceptions is, then, to be taken as a constraint on cognitive relations, not as a constraint on persons’ holding cognitive attitudes towards others. Appreciation, esteem, love, tolerance, responsibility, and respect are affirmative attitudes which can contribute to the constitution of cognitive relations only if they occur in suitably reciprocal constellations.

3. *Common Ground*

Most authors writing on recognition today subscribe to one or another form of what Ikäheimo and Laitinen call the ‘dialogical conception’. The Hegelian thesis that recognition has to be

²⁵ For some short remarks on imagined recognition see H. IKÄHEIMO, *On the Genus and Species of Recognition*, cit., p. 460, footnote 5; H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition*, cit., p. 47.

²⁶ H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition*, cit., pp. 37-38.

construed as an intrinsically reciprocal affair has gained solid consensus in the current debate: in order for recognition to occur it is necessary that there be at least two persons who mutually recognize each other. This reciprocity constraint on recognition will be quite explicit in various quotations from different authors to be provided below, but at this point it is worth noting a specific version of it which has been put forward by Judith Butler: «[R]ecognition cannot be unilaterally given. In the moment that I give it, I am potentially given it, and the form in which I offer it is potentially given to me»²⁷. Butler here presupposes that recognition is something that can be offered, given and – presumably – taken (accepted) by persons. I will come back to this presupposition in the next section. She claims, moreover, that the reciprocity of recognitive attitudes which is necessary for recognition relations is, at least ‘potentially’, the reciprocity of attitudes of the same ‘form’. Recalling Honneth’s three forms of recognition, a natural way of understanding the latter claim would be this: love is potentially reciprocated by love, esteem is potentially reciprocated by esteem, and respect by respect. More generally, and without mixing up Honneth’s views with Butler’s, the gist of Butler’s claim concerning reciprocity seems to be that for any two persons, x and y , and any recognitive attitude V : if xVy , then possibly yVx . The modal expression ‘possibly’, of course, allows for a vast multitude of interpretations. Here, I only want to draw attention to the thought that it might be mistaken to forge a close bond between the idea of reciprocity of recognition and the thesis that reciprocity, in the case at hand, is to be construed in terms of sameness of recognitive attitudes.

Another thesis that has gained the status of common ground in current debates is the claim that recognition plays a central role in processes of identity-formation and in the development of self-consciousness (let’s call this the ‘constitution thesis’). With regard to this claim there seems to be a solid consensus between Axel Honneth – whose version of the constitution thesis has been introduced in the preceding section – and authors otherwise as different as Judith Butler, Robert Brandom, Avishai Margalit, and

²⁷ J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, cit., p. 26.

Charles Taylor²⁸. Thus Butler writes: «True subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal recognition, for we [...] come to ourselves [...] through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us»²⁹.

Emphasizing the importance of recognition for the development of cognitive self-relations, Margalit maintains that «[o]ne has to recognize and to be recognized by the other, in order to be able to cognize oneself»³⁰. Brandom, in his reconstruction of Hegel's views on self-consciousness and self-constitution in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, seems not just to offer an interpretation of Hegel's text but to bring forward a claim of his own when he writes: «I cannot be properly self-conscious (recognize myself) except in the context of a recognition structure that is *reciprocal*: insofar as I am recognized by those I recognize»³¹. I will return to Brandom's identification of self-consciousness with self-recognition. At this point it suffices to note his claim that socially reciprocal recognition is a *conditio sine qua non* of self-consciousness. Last but not least, Taylor, in his classic essay *The Politics of Recognition*, argues for the claim that «due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need»³². According to Taylor, the crucial role that recognition plays in the formation of personal identities can best be explained in terms of the fundamentally dialogical genesis of identity and personhood:

²⁸ Even Nancy Fraser, while otherwise critical of what she calls the «identity model», seems to accept the constitution thesis. Her criticisms of Honneth and Taylor are not directed against the constitution thesis itself but against the idea of transposing «the Hegelian recognition schema onto the cultural and political terrain» and against «equating the politics of recognition with identity politics». (N. FRASER, *Rethinking Recognition. Overcoming Displacement and Reification in Cultural Politics*, «New Left Review», III, May/June 2000, pp. 107-120, here pp. 109-110.)

²⁹ J. BUTLER, *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, Columbia University Press, New York 1987, p. 58.

³⁰ A. MARGALIT, *Recognition II. Recognizing the Brother and the Other*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volumes», LXXV, 2001, pp. 127-139.

³¹ R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*, cit., p. 137.

³² CH. TAYLOR, *The Politics of Recognition*, in A. GUTMANN (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1994, pp. 25-73, here p. 26.

«We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression»³³. It is through exchange, dialogue and confrontation with others, says Taylor, that we learn and acquire the languages needed for defining – for making sense – of ourselves: «The genesis of the human mind is in this sense not monological, not something each person accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical»³⁴.

Let me make, in passing, two observations on the passages just quoted from Butler and Margalit. For someone who subscribes to a dialogical conception of recognition and takes the reciprocity constraint seriously the expression ‘reciprocal recognition’ in Butler’s sentence will seem pleonastic. It would suffice to speak of communities that provide for recognition, reciprocity already being implied. A slightly different point applies to the sentence quoted from Margalit. For someone taking the reciprocity constraint on recognition seriously Margalit’s wording ‘one has to recognize and to be recognized by the other’ might have a slightly off-key ring to it. It seems to suggest that the ability to cognize oneself depends on two different conditions which, in principle, can be satisfied separately and independently: the condition that one recognize ‘the other’, and the condition that one be recognized by ‘the other’. If the dialogical conception of recognition is correct, however, this distinction lacks justification.

The reciprocity constraint and the constitution thesis, i.e. the two theses which I have claimed to be common ground among authors involved in current debates on recognition, are usually taken to be explanatorily related to each other. The idea, more or less explicit in various authors, is that it is precisely in virtue of entering in recognition relations that self-consciousness and personal identity come about. One of the most sustained efforts to spell out this explanatory claim is Robert Brandom’s³⁵. Before discussing Brandom’s views on this matter, however, another

³³ Ivi, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*, cit.

element needs to be added to the reconstruction of recognitive phenomena that has been provided up until now.

4. *Recognitive Acts*

So far I have talked about recognition in terms of attitudes and relations. It can also be construed in terms of actions or performances³⁶. All three readings are present in the literature and often very little or no attention is paid to keeping them apart and to specifying which one is, respectively, intended in a given context³⁷. A *prima facie* plausible way to relate the three different perspectives on recognition to each other – the working assumption that I here adopt – is the following: take a recognitive attitude to be any affirmative stance (*habitus*) V that any person, x , can take towards any other person, y , such that x takes V towards y because x appreciates (“endorses”) some quality Q as a valuable quality of persons *and* takes y to instantiate Q; take recognitive relations to supervene upon (somehow) matching *reciprocal* recognitive attitudes held by x and y ; and take recognitive acts as *expressing* recognitive attitudes. The attitudes can, but do not have to be, made explicit through recognitive acts. Moreover, they can, but do not have to be, consciously arrived at or held.

When thought of in terms of actions which express recognitive attitudes, it might be tempting to compare recognition to someone’s sharing something – a bar of chocolate, say – with someone else. Sharing a chocolate bar with you is not something I can do all by myself. I cannot share it with you if you do not take an active role in that process, i.e. if you do not accept my offer and take a piece. In the same vein, recognizing you is not something I can do all by myself. I cannot recognize you unless you accept and respond to my recognitive acts and attitudes in

³⁶ See A. HONNETH, *Recognition I. Invisibility: On the Epistemology of ‘Recognition’*, «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. Supplementary Volumes», LXXV, 2001, pp.111-126. I omit Nancy Fraser’s construal of recognition in terms of status. See N. FRASER, *Rethinking Recognition*, cit., and her contributions to N. FRASER, A. HONNETH, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, cit.

³⁷ Honneth, for instance, employs all three readings in his texts.

the right way. Successful acts of recognizing someone, just as successful acts of sharing something, are intrinsically intersubjective. They require the coordinated doings and matching intentions of at least two persons. As far as the intrinsically intersubjective character of cognitive acts is concerned the comparison with acts of sharing something with somebody works rather well. However, the analogy has obvious limits and risks being misleading for it seems to suggest that recognition, in intersubjective recognizings, plays a role that is structurally similar to the one played by chocolate bars in intersubjective acts of sharing chocolate. In other words, the comparison might mislead one into thinking of recognition as an object, as something that exists independently of cognitive acts and attitudes – and Nikolas Kompridis is right in pointing out that it would be wrong to think of recognition in this way: «Recognition is not something over which we can dispose, or which we can mete out in the appropriate amounts to the appropriate people at the appropriate time. [...] This is partly because it is not a thing, easily measurable and redeployable»³⁸.

In the context of the passage just quoted Kompridis does not say why he thinks that it would be wrong to consider recognition a thing or an object. But a justification for his claim is not all that difficult to find. A chocolate bar is not brought into existence by sharing it. Recognition, on the other hand, is brought about by intersubjective cognitive acts and attitudes – at least if we subscribe to a ‘dialogical’ conception of recognition in the sense of Ikäheimo and Laitinen. The *locus classicus* of this point is Hegel’s *Self-Consciousness* chapter in *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Thus the movement is simply the double movement of the two self-consciousnesses. Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Ac-

³⁸ N. KOMPRIDIS, *Struggling over the Meaning of Recognition. A Matter of Identity, Justice, or Freedom?*, «European Journal of Political Theory», VI (3), pp. 277-289, here p. 284.

tion by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both³⁹.

A type of action more apt for comparison with recognitive acts – more apt than sharing chocolate bars, that is – would, then, seem to be concluding a contract. Concluding a contract with you is not something I can do all by myself. You have to perform a token of the same type of action that I perform – for instance: sign a specific document with your name (mind the *deixis*) – in order for me to succeed in concluding a contract with you and in order for you to succeed in concluding a contract with me. Both the difference to sharing chocolate and the closer similarity to recognition become evident when we take into account that the contract is a normative relation between you and me (the contracting parties) that emerges from and is brought about *by* our coordinated performances of specific actions⁴⁰. Just like the relation of recognition, it is not something which is there to be shared or given independently of our coordinated acts but something to be created *through* them. However, this analogy, too, has its limits. Contractual relations depend on contexts of either positive or (if one subscribes to the idea) natural law which regulate the validity conditions of intended contracts and, in the case of positive law, sanction breaches of legally valid ones. Recognition relations, on the other hand, might very well not depend on positive legal institutions or on a presumed order of natural law – at any rate, this is plausible to assume with respect to recognition relations brought about by reciprocal affirmative attitudes of love, moral respect and social esteem. Presumably, Judith Butler would disagree at this point. On her view, the shapes and the contents of specific recognition relations are never entirely created by the persons involved. Rather, Butler takes them to be always partly determined by what she generically calls «the norm»⁴¹. This point will be taken up again in section 6. Let me now turn to Robert

³⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., § 182.

⁴⁰ See J.P. BRUNE, B. RÄHME, *Vertrag*, in Gert Ueding (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 9, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2009, pp. 1102-1115, here p. 1102.

⁴¹ See J. BUTLER, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, cit., p. 26.

Brandom's attempt at accounting for reflexive recognition in terms of reciprocity and transitivity.

5. *Symmetry, Reflexivity, and Transitivity*

The line of argument that Brandom develops in his essay *The Structure of Desire and Recognition* is quite intricate. What is clear enough, however, is that he wants to make good on the explanatory claim, implicit in much writing on recognition in the Hegelian tradition, that self-consciousness has to be explained in terms of reflexive recognition and that cognitive reflexivity is mediated (made possible) by the reciprocity that is intrinsic to cognitive relations. In other words, Brandom wants to offer a justification for the thesis that self-consciousness (reflexive recognition) is «a *social* achievement»⁴² in a very strong sense: it is an achievement rendered possible only by specific intersubjective relations that are reciprocal by their very 'nature'. Accordingly, the «big question» that he sets out to answer is this: «Why should it be the case that *reciprocal* (that is, *symmetric*) recognition is a necessary condition of *reflexive* recognition (that is, self-consciousness, awareness of oneself *as* a self)»⁴³.

An important point to notice is that Brandom, in his question, interprets the reciprocity of cognitive relations in terms of a concept of symmetry taken from formal relation theory. Later on I will have something to say on whether this is a good idea. In order to see how Brandom's answer to what he calls the «big question» is supposed to work, let us again use an example.

Assume a group of three persons, *a*, *b*, and *c*, such that *a* and *b* stand in a recognition relation to each other, and *b* and *c* stand in a recognition relation to each other: *aRb*, *bRc*. As pointed out above, a key element of dialogical (recognizee-sensitive) conceptions of recognition which rely on a largely Hegelian construal of *Anerkennung* is that for two persons *x* and *y* to be the relata of a recognition relation it is not sufficient that *x* holds a cognitive

⁴² R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*, cit., p. 137.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

attitude toward y or that y holds some such attitude toward x . Rather, x and y have to recognize each other in a reciprocal way, i.e. x can recognize y only in virtue of y 's recognizing x and *vice versa*. Brandom construes the reciprocity constraint on R in terms of symmetry. For all persons x, y : if xRy , then yRx .

The addition of the assumption that recognition (R) is a symmetric relation to our toy example allows us to infer bRa and cRb from aRb and bRc . Now, Brandom can be interpreted as saying that one way to develop the reflexive recognition of a , b , and c out of this constellation – i.e. one way to license the inference from aRb , bRa , bRc , and cRb to aRa , bRb , and cRc – would consist in assuming that R is *transitive*: «[O]ne way to forge the desired connection between social reciprocity of recognition and self-consciousness would be to establish that recognition must by its very nature be transitive»⁴⁴. R is transitive if and only if for all x, y, z : if xRy and yRz , then xRz . The addition of the transitivity assumption to our toy example allows us to infer aRa , bRb , and cRc from aRb , bRa , bRc , and cRb . At first glance b 's self-recognition might appear to be somewhat privileged when compared to the respective self-recognitions of a and c since it derives both from b 's standing in a relation of recognition to a and from her standing in a relation of recognition to c . On closer inspection, however, this impression disappears, for transitivity allows us to infer aRc and cRa from aRb , bRa , bRc , and cRb . So a 's and c 's self-recognitions, just as b 's self-recognition, are supported by two source-relations each: aRa is entailed both by aRb and by aRc , and cRc is entailed both by cRb and by cRa . Recognition nicely distributed. So far, so good.

In a recent article Radu Neculau approves of Brandom's attempt at accounting for self-consciousness in terms of reflexive recognition:

As Robert B. Brandom shows in his convincing account of normativity, self-hood and recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it is an "algebraic fact" that, for a relation to count as reflexive, that is, to be the type of relation that Hegel called self-consciousness (or, in Honneth's formally differentiated model

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 138.

of selfhood, “positive relation to self”), it must be both transitive and reciprocal⁴⁵.

But this comment seems to get Brandom wrong on at least two counts. There are reflexive relations which Hegel, presumably, would not have counted as relations of self-consciousness because it would be absurd to construe them as such – for instance ‘is born on the same day as’ or ‘is numerically identical with’. Moreover, there are reflexive relations which are not both transitive and reciprocal (read: symmetric), for instance ‘is similar in at least one respect to’ (symmetric and reflexive, but not transitive) or ‘is of the same height as or taller than’ (transitive and reflexive, but not symmetric). What Brandom says is, rather, that any relation that is both symmetric and transitive is also reflexive, i.e. symmetry and transitivity are jointly sufficient for reflexivity⁴⁶. *A fortiori*, if the recognition relation is both symmetric and transitive, then it is also reflexive. This claim, of course, is different from the one that Neculau ascribes to Brandom in the passage just quoted. If every reflexive relation had to be both transitive and symmetric, then transitivity and symmetry would be individually and jointly necessary for reflexivity. Given the above counterexamples this is clearly not the case.

It must be said, however, that Brandom himself is less than clear about what precisely he wants to establish in his essay *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*. Recall the «big question» that he sets out to answer: why should we take reciprocal (symmetric) recognition to be a necessary condition of reflexive recognition (self-consciousness)? And now consider his reply: symmetry and transitivity of recognition jointly entail (are jointly sufficient for) reflexivity of recognition. Can this count as an answer to the «big question» at all? It wouldn’t seem so. It might fare much better as a reply to this question: assume we had a solid justification for the thesis that the recognition relation is symmetric – what would

⁴⁵ R. NECULAU, *Being Oneself in Another. Recognition and the Culturalist Deformation of Identity*, «Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy», LV (2), 2012, pp. 148-170, here p. 164, with reference to R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*, cit., pp. 143-147.

⁴⁶ See R.B. BRANDOM, *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*, cit., p. 137 and p. 143.

entitle us to infer that it is also reflexive? Or this one: assume we had a solid justification for the thesis that the recognition relation is transitive – what would entitle us to infer that it is also reflexive? These latter questions are interesting in their own right, but they are different from the «big» one that Brandom sets out to answer.

A detailed discussion of the merits of Brandom's account of self-consciousness in terms of a symmetric and transitive recognition relation would require another paper. In the remainder of this section I want to relate two of Brandom's conceptual suggestions – the idea that recognitive relations might be transitive and the idea that the reciprocity of recognitive relations can be usefully spelled out in terms of symmetry – to Honneth's tripartite differentiation of recognition into love, respect, and esteem. As will become clear shortly, the first suggestion fails badly in the contexts of love and esteem, and the second is problematic when applied to the context of esteem. Both of Brandom's conceptual suggestions might, however, be more promising when applied to contexts of moral and legal respect. In order to avoid misunderstanding: neither the fact that, when it comes to the recognitive relation types of love and esteem, it does not make much sense to think of recognition in terms of transitivity nor the fact that the same holds for thinking of recognition as a symmetric relation in the context of esteem speak against Brandom's account (nor do they speak against Honneth's theory). Brandom makes it very clear that he only takes one specific type of recognitive relation – introduced and defined by himself – to be both symmetric and transitive, the one that he dubs «robust recognition»⁴⁷, and Honneth's account is not even mentioned in *The Structure of Desire and Recognition*. However, the question of how Brandom's theses relate to Honneth's theory merits attention all the same since Honneth subscribes to the explanatory claim that Brandom wants to elaborate and justify: the claim that self-consciousness and – in Honneth's case – personal identity depend upon intersubjective recognition relations.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 144.

In order to prepare the following arguments, let me introduce an assumption that I expect to be uncontentious. With regard to the recognitive attitudes of love and esteem it is plausible to assume that in order for them to be capable of contributing to the constitution of recognition relations between two arbitrarily chosen persons, x and y , x and y have to be acquainted with each other. Read ‘being acquainted with each other’ in a very weak way: x and y are acquainted with each other if and only if x knows that y exists and y knows that x exists⁴⁸. Framed in this way, the acquaintance condition on recognitive relations constituted by reciprocal attitudes of either love or esteem is weak enough to cover both cases. Its gist is this: if x and y are not acquainted with each other, then none of the recognition relations of which x and y are the relata (if there are any such relations) is based on either attitudes of love or attitudes of esteem. With regard to love at least this might appear as a gross understatement – and of course it is. But still, it seems correct to say that for two persons to be the relata of a love relation they have to be acquainted with each other in the minimal sense of ‘acquaintance’ which I have just defined by stipulation.

Let’s turn to transitivity and love, then. In what follows I once again appeal to an aspect of the same every-day usage of the verb ‘to love’ which has already been appealed to in section 2 above – and which is probably familiar enough not to provoke the question ‘but what is love?’. To say that love (L) is a transitive relation is to say that for all persons x, y and z : If xLy , and yLz , then xLz . (Saying this, of course, runs against the familiar use of ‘to love’ that I am appealing to.) Assume that a loves b , that b loves both a and c , and that c loves b . The condition of reciprocity of recognitive attitudes is met in this example. In this respect at least there does not seem to be any reason for denying that a and b stand in the recognitive relation of love to each other or that b and c stand in that relation: aLb, bLc . Adding the assumption that L is transitive to the set-up of this example would lead to the following unacceptable result: since a and b , on the one hand, and

⁴⁸ The *de re/de dicto* ambiguity in this formulation could easily be taken care of, but I let this pass.

b and c , on the other, stand in a recognitive relation of love to each other, a and c stand in that very same relation. But why should they? At any rate, an assumption about recognition that allows us to infer aLc from aLb and bLc should be highly suspect. It should be suspect because, for all the set-up of the example tells us, it might very well be that a does not know that c exists or that c does not know that a exists, or both. That is, it might well be that a and c are not acquainted with each other in the minimal sense defined above. It should also be suspect because even if we add the assumption that a and c are acquainted with each other and, furthermore, the assumptions that a knows that bLc and that c knows that aLb we are still not entitled to infer aLc . For all that the augmented set-up of the case tells us, a might despise and hate c precisely because she knows that bLc , and c might despise and hate a precisely because he knows that aLb . Attitudes of hatred and contempt, be they mutual or unilateral, cannot contribute to the constitution of recognition relations.

Consider transitivity and esteem. Assume that a holds b in esteem, that b holds both a and c in esteem, and that c holds b in esteem. Again, reciprocity of recognitive attitudes is given between a and b and between b and c , so aEb , bEc . Transitivity would allow us to infer aEc . But for all that the set-up of the case tells us, a and c might be unacquainted with each other. Therefore, the assumption that E is transitive must be rejected.

Consider love and symmetry. For all persons x, y : xLy only if yLx . It is difficult to find fault with this combination if one subscribes to the ideas that L is a genuinely recognitive relation and that recognitive relations are constituted by reciprocal recognitive attitudes.

Concerning esteem and symmetry there is more to be said. If a esteems b as an excellent politician and b esteems a as an excellent musician – is that sufficient to establish a recognition relation between a and b ? The answer depends on whether we include the ‘as-...’-component into the formulation of the reciprocity constraint. If we do, then a ’s and b ’s recognitive attitudes do not interlock in the right way and, consequently, fail to bring about a recognition relation. If, on the other hand, we leave the ‘as-...’-component out of the reciprocity constraint, then a ’s and b ’s

mutual recognitive attitudes of esteem, even though concerning different qualities of their respective subject-objects, do add up to a recognition relation. Another question: if *a* esteems *b* as an excellent politician and *b* respects *a* as an autonomous and responsible person (in the moral and in the legal sense) – is that sufficient for establishing a recognitive relation between *a* and *b*? The answer depends on whether we include the condition of qualitative sameness of recognitive attitudes into the reciprocity constraint. If we do, *a*'s and *b*'s recognitive relations do not match and, again, fail to bring about recognition. If, however, we formulate the reciprocity constraint in a way that does not require qualitative sameness of recognitive attitudes, then – at least as far as reciprocity is concerned – nothing speaks against the assumption that *a*'s holding *b* in esteem as an excellent politician and *b*'s respecting *a* as an autonomous and responsible person *do* jointly constitute a recognition relation between *a* and *b*.

To construe the reciprocity constraint on recognition in terms of symmetry amounts to the claim that two persons stand in a recognition relation only if they hold recognitive attitudes towards each other which coincide in both quality (type of attitude) and quantity (intensity or degree of attitude). Arguably, a symmetry constraint on recognition along these lines is too demanding, i.e. too restrictive. It excludes too much, as it were. The point is addressed in passing by Ikäheimo and Laitinen⁴⁹. The thesis that recognition is a reciprocal relation – a two-way complex of recognitive attitudes, in Ikäheimo and Laitinen's terminology – should not be taken as tantamount to the claim that recognition is a symmetric relation in the sense attached to the term 'symmetry' in logic. The recognitive attitudes involved in interpersonal relations of esteem are not – and in many cases cannot be – strictly symmetric. Assume that *a* esteems *b* as a great playwright. It would be close to absurd to claim that a genuine recognitive relation which involves *a*'s specific esteem for *b* as a constitutive element can hold between the two only if *b* esteems *a* as a great playwright as well. *A* might never have written a dramatic text in her life – imagine her to be a painter, say. Yet, this is

⁴⁹ See H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition*, cit., p. 38.

exactly what we would have to claim if we were to construe recognitive relations as requiring symmetry of recognitive attitudes in the logical sense of ‘symmetry’.

Ikäheimo and Laitinen propose a reciprocity constraint on recognition which is weaker than the symmetry condition. It demands only that there be *the right kinds* of mutual recognitive attitudes and does not require the attitudes involved to be of the same kind or to be held to the same degree. As mentioned in section 2 above, Ikäheimo and Laitinen hold that in order for *a*’s recognitive attitude of esteeming *b* as a great playwright to be capable of contributing to the constitution of a recognition relation between *a* and *b* it is necessary that *b* recognizes *a* as a «relevant judge»⁵⁰ or as a «competent recognizer»⁵¹. One can be a competent judge with respect to someone’s degree of mastery in writing dramatic texts – and one can also be recognized as such – without being be a playwright oneself.

Both the assumption that recognition is transitive and the assumption that it is symmetric appear to be less problematic in the contexts of moral and legal respect. One reason for this might be that the attitudes of moral and legal respect, unlike those of love or esteem, can be directed at ‘generalized others’. And, unlike recognitive relations based on love or on esteem, moral and legal recognition relations, arguably, do not require their relata to be acquainted with each other in the minimal sense of ‘acquaintance’ defined above. Of course, there can be moral and legal recognition between concrete persons who are acquainted with each other, but the important point to notice here is that in the sphere of respect in Honneth’s sense recognitive relations do not have to take this shape.

6. *Recognition, Understanding, Bodies, and Norms*

Recognition relations are, to a certain extent at least, hermetic and epistemic relations. In order for two persons to be-

⁵⁰ H. IKÄHEIMO, *On the Genus and Species of Recognition*, cit., pp. 450-452.

⁵¹ H. IKÄHEIMO, A. LAITINEN, *Analyzing Recognition*, cit., p. 38.

come the relata of a recognition relation they have to interpret, understand and come to know each other, i.e. they have to acquire true and grounded beliefs about each other. This point is connected to but different from the minimal acquaintance constraint on recognitive relations based on love or respect which has been introduced above. It is one thing to be acquainted with a person, it is another to be in a position to understand or know that person. The first is a necessary condition of the second. The close link between recognition, knowledge and understanding stands at the background of the way in which Judith Butler uses the concept of recognition in *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

The question most central to recognition is a direct one, and it is addressed to the other: “Who are you?” This question assumes that there is an other before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend, one whose uniqueness and nonsubstitutability set a limit to the model of reciprocal recognition offered within the Hegelian scheme and to the possibility of knowing another more generally⁵².

Butler can be interpreted as claiming that the range and the shape of possible recognitive relations is limited and constrained precisely *because* recognition presupposes understanding and knowledge of persons. Butler’s view seems to be that in order to give an adequate answer to the question ‘who are you?’ the one to whom the question is posed would have to offer a complete account of herself – an account, that is, which would have to capture her very identity and communicate it to the questioner. For several reasons, says Butler, such accounts are not to be had⁵³. Accounts of oneself are always incomplete and inadequate, they always miss something or get something wrong. There is a decidedly essentialist drift to how Butler writes about persons and their identities. When she uses expressions such as «the “I”»⁵⁴ or «the self»⁵⁵ it is not just as a convenient way to avoid stylistically

⁵² J. BUTLER, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, cit., p. 31.

⁵³ See *ivi*, p. 39.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 26, *passim*.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 10, *passim*.

cumbersome universal quantifications over persons. She interprets the incompleteness and inadequateness of accounts of oneself in terms of entities (to wit, subjective identities) which necessarily outrun and evade linguistic expression and communication, as something that outstrips describability. I do not find this particularly helpful and will continue to speak of persons, instead.

One of the reasons that Butler offers for her claim that accounts of oneself are inevitably inadequate is that they have to be framed in vocabularies which reflect established norms governing the description of persons: «there are [...] *norms* that facilitate my telling about myself but that I do not author and that render me substitutable at the very moment that I seek to establish the history of my singularity»⁵⁶. The thought seems to be that in using general terms such as ‘heterosexual’, ‘male’, ‘African-American’, ‘lesbian’, ‘Muslim’, ‘female’, ‘Christian’, ‘transsexual’ etc. we submit to interpretations of ourselves which are not of our own making and which, therefore, fail to render what we say authentic. In using them to describe ourselves we inevitably fail in what, according to Butler, we intend to do when giving accounts of ourselves, i.e. we fail to establish and to communicate our respective singularities. Butler refers to our bodies as being among the sources of what she calls our nonsubstitutability and singularity – one is tempted to read: our essence as persons – and which, according to her, evades complete narration and communication in language:

The singular body to which a narrative [an account, B.R.] refers cannot be captured by a full narration, not only because the body has a formative history that remains irrecoverable by reflection, but because primary relations are formative in ways that produce a necessary opacity in our understanding of ourselves⁵⁷.

The hermeneutic and epistemic limits which constrain the range and shapes of intersubjective recognition relations also limit

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 39, see also p. 35.

⁵⁷ Ivi, pp. 20-21, see also p. 38.

our reflexive self-understanding. If we assume, as Butler seems to do, that recognition requires full understanding of the singularities of the persons involved, then the very possibility of recognition becomes questionable. In fact, one possible interpretation of Butler's line of argument is precisely this: in order for two persons to enter in a genuine recognition relation with each other they have to gain full and complete understanding of each other. Full and complete understanding of persons (understanding of persons in their respective singularities) is not to be had. Therefore, genuine recognition relations don't exist.

I tend to agree with the second premise of this argument. But why subscribe to the first? Recognition does not have to be thought of as an all or nothing affair, and recognitive attitudes do not have to be construed as being directed at persons in their entirety.

A thought that is important to Butler's line of argument in *Giving an Account of Oneself* is that recognition should be construed as an open-ended ethical project: «“Oh, now I know who you are”: at this moment I cease to address you or to be addressed by you»⁵⁸. But Butler seems to maintain that in order to think of recognition as an ongoing project we have to think of it as something that cannot really be achieved: «To revise recognition as an ethical project, we will need to see it as, in principle, unsatisfiable»⁵⁹. If 'unsatisfiable' is here supposed to be read along the lines of 'unreachable', 'unachievable' or 'unrealizable', then Butler's characterization might well be unnecessarily strong. It would be sufficient for her purposes to transpose the ontological claim that recognition is unsatisfiable into an epistemological key. Instead of saying that recognition is, in principle, unsatisfiable, unachievable or unrealizable one might say that the obtaining of recognitive relations between persons cannot be verified with epistemic certainty. Furthermore, for capturing the idea that recognition is always an unfinished project, one that can never be justifiably taken as completed, it suffices to characterize recognition as fragile and demanding in the sense that recognitive relations,

⁵⁸ J. BUTLER, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, cit., p. 43.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

while maybe being achievable, can deteriorate and vanish once they have been achieved and that, in order not to do so, they need to be nourished and fostered⁶⁰.

The due admission of epistemic and hermeneutic limitations which are imposed by established norms and vocabularies does not commit us to the thesis that recognition is impossible or unachievable. It should, rather, be interpreted as the starting point of an argument to the conclusion that there is an ethical obligation to reflect upon and scrutinize existing narratives and accounts, to rework and reshape the norms and vocabularies in which they are framed, and to make them more adequate for describing and understanding ourselves.

⁶⁰ See C.-G. HEIDEGREN, *Recognition: A Theory of the Middle?*, cit.