Philosophy & Social Criticism

Anthropology and normativity: a critique of Axel Honneth's 'formal conception of ethical life'

Christopher Zurn

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://psc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/26/1/115

Published by:
$SAGE Publications
http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Philosophy & Social Criticism* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://psc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://psc.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Christopher Zurn

Review essay

Anthropology and normativity: a critique of Axel Honneth's 'formal conception of ethical life'

In his most recent book *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Axel Honneth argues for a new conception of critical social theory by focusing on personal and social struggles for recognition. By outlining three different aspects of ontogenetic development, and by explicating the three structures of relation-to-self that each ideally results in, Honneth hopes to refocus critical social theory by grounding the theoretical explanation and normative justification of intra-mundane social struggles for recognition upon an understanding of personal identity formation. In this paper, I would like to critically examine one aspect of Honneth's project, namely, his contention that a 'formal conception of ethical life' can function as the normative standpoint from which to judge progressive and pathological forms of social organization. In brief, this 'formal conception of ethical life' is intended to delineate 'the entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization' (Honneth, 1995b: 173).

The lynchpin of Honneth's theory is his account of the structural interconnection between (1) the three stages of individual identity development, (2) the three forms of intersubjective recognition required for each stage, and (3) the forms of social organization needed as preconditions for the healthy, undistorted self-realization of that society's members. This structural interconnection then provides a basis for explaining processes of social change – explicating both the impulse for expanded recognition and the normative claims raised in social struggles for individual and group recognition.

PSC

Drawing on the early 'Jena Period' work of Hegel, the social psy-
chology of George Herbert Mead, and contemporary objects-relations
psychoanalysis, Honneth argues for an account of identity formation as
an ongoing, intersubjective process of struggling to gain mutual recog-
nition from one's partners in interaction. Through this process of
struggle, individuals develop three different forms of relation-to-self
through three different types of social interaction: self-confidence is
gained in primary, affective relations, self-respect in legal relations of
rights, and self-esteem in local communities defined by shared value
orientations. (It is important to note here that these three terms – self-
confidence, self-respect and self-esteem – serve as technical terms for
Honneth, and their meaning is not always the same as our everyday
usage of them would indicate.) These intersubjective processes of learn-
ing 'to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners to
interaction, as their social addressee' (Honneth, 1995b: 92) are the
media through which individuals become who they are, and within
which social forms of life are continually maintained and reproduced.

The first and most basic form of recognition is achieved in intimate
relations of love and friendship, through which individuals are first able
to achieve a measure of confidence in themselves *as* distinct from their
environment and in the constancy of the world around them. To develop
self-confidence in the stability of their own identity and the world, chil-
dren need to be recognized continually and attended to in strong
emotional relationships which provide a stable reality within which they
can overcome their originally indistinct symbiotic relationships to
primary others.

The second basic form of recognition is that achieved through the
acknowledgment of one's formal capacity for autonomous moral action.
Through the universal rights accorded to all members of a society, just
insofar as they *are* members of that society, individuals are able to
achieve self-respect for themselves as equals of other members, entitled
to make their own decisions about how to conceive of and realize their
own life plans. Thus, this second form of relation-to-self – self-respect –
is realized through legal relations which recognize one as equally deserv-
ing of rights to negative liberty, access to political processes, and the
burdens of legal responsibility.

The third form of recognition occurs through one's valued partici-
pation in and positive contribution to a shared way of life that expresses
distinctive, communally held values. In a group defined by social solidarity
(usually a group smaller in size than the group of citizens as a whole in
which self-respect is realized), one is able to achieve self-esteem by being
recognized as a distinct individual, with particular traits and abilities that
positively contribute to the shared projects of that solidaristic community.
In modern societies, this third form of relation-to-self is separated – and

must be separated – from the second form of self-respect. This is because, to be fair, legal relations must recognize in all citizens the abstract characteristics of moral autonomy, whereas, in esteeming a person, what is at issue is precisely that person's characteristic traits that are positively evaluated within a local community's shared horizon of values. Thus while self-confidence and self-esteem involve the understanding of oneself in one's concrete particularity, self-respect involves a relation to oneself in one's abstract universality.

For Honneth, it is important to realize that these three forms of relation-to-self – self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem – are onto-genetically fulfilled in a developmental hierarchy with a directional logic. If one is not fully recognized as an autonomous citizen deserving of equal rights, then it will be impossible for one to develop an undistorted sense of self-esteem. Likewise, if one has been denied the kind of emotional care necessary for self-confidence, then one cannot develop an undistorted sense of self-respect.

Corresponding to the three positive forms of recognition, Honneth analyzes three forms of *disrespect*, which serve the function of explaining historical struggles for recognition. Experiences of disrespect serve as the moral motivation for individuals to struggle for expanded relations of recognition by highlighting the defects in extant social arrangements. At the most fundamental level, when one's control over one's own body – one's physical integrity – is violated by physical abuse, torture, rape, etc., then one loses the trust in the stability of one's basic identity and the constancy of one's world necessary for a healthy sense of self-confidence. Secondly, one's moral self-respect can be negatively affected through the systematic denial of rights bestowed on other citizens. Finally, one's self-esteem can be undermined by the denigration and degradation of one's way of life, for in these cases one's way of life is not receiving the social esteem necessary for a healthy understanding of one's unique capacities and achievements.

Thus, embedded within the structural logic of the three forms of recognition and the three corresponding forms of disrespect are three different types of moral claims – claims to be recognized as the autonomous and unique person one is. Disrespectful behavior

> . . . represents an injustice not simply because it harms subjects or restricts their freedom to act, but because it injures them with regard to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively. . . . The normative self-image of each and every individual human being . . . is dependent on the possibility of being continually backed up by others. (Honneth, 1995b: 131)

Finally, it is these implicit moral claims which are raised when individuals and groups struggle to overcome perceived violations of the

forms of recognition that each deserves. When individual experiences of disrespect are understood as the norm for all members of a certain group – when they are experienced epidemically – the potential motivation exists for collective political resistance to the structures of society that systematically deny the members of that group the recognition they need for full self-realization.

Honneth argues that, out of his anthropological and sociological explanations of struggles for recognition, one can abstract a formal conception of ethical life. This formal conception is intended to provide a normative standpoint from which to evaluate particular social formations as either progressive or regressive with respect to their capacity for allowing and instantiating full self-realization for each of that society's members. Crucial to understanding the role intended for this standpoint is Honneth's attempt to reinvigorate the project of a *social* philosophy intended to elucidate and diagnose social pathologies.[1] In contrast to both moral philosophy, which attends to questions of individual obligation and right action, and political philosophy, which attends to those of law and fair distribution, social philosophy is concerned with the structural conditions necessary for the good life and social deformations in those conditions which impede healthy self-realization. Insofar as social philosophy takes the form of a therapeutic critique of pathological social practices, it requires a standard of social normalcy for evaluation. According to Honneth, traditional versions of social philosophy either were lacking in determinate standards of healthy social relations as grounds for their critiques (e.g. Nietzsche, Arendt and Adorno), or relied on suspect teleological accounts of history (e.g. Lukács and Hegel) or ideologically biased, speculative accounts of human nature (e.g. Rousseau and Gehlen). What is needed is a normatively grounded standard which abstracts from any substantive picture of the good life but which can, nevertheless, specify the formal conditions necessary for healthy identity development in developed societies: a formal conception of ethical life.

The basic move in Honneth's development of this formal conception is to make a distinction between (1) any concrete instantiations of social patterns of recognition and (2) the structurally universal features of any socially organized forms of recognition necessary as preconditions for non-pathological ego-identity. Honneth hopes to combine the best features of both Kantian and Aristotelian ethical theories, while avoiding some of their respective deficiencies. The formal conception is intended to insist upon the importance of a Kantian conception of autonomy as self-direction, while eschewing the overly abstract and exclusivistic focus on formal rules and cognitive capacities (specifically in Habermas' account of discourse ethics) characteristic of such approaches. On the other hand, it is also intended to broaden the notion of individual autonomy by articulating the structural features of the good life and by explicating the

motivational well-springs of ethical action, while eschewing the particularism characteristic of most communitarian approaches. Honneth intends to walk this fine line between the demands of normative universalism and teleological substantialism by making a form/content distinction: the formal conception of ethical life is intended to articulate 'the structural elements of ethical life, which, from the general point of view of the communicative enabling of self-realization, can be normatively extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life' (Honneth, 1995b: 172). Honneth delineates two criteria that this conception must meet: (1) it must be formal and abstract enough to avoid raising 'the suspicion of representing merely the deposits of concrete interpretations of the good life' (Honneth, 1995b: 173), and (2) it has to contain enough determinate content in order 'to say more about the general structures of a successful life than is entailed by general references to individual self-determination' (Honneth, 1995b: 174).

It seems to me that there are two fundamental obstacles to developing such a formal conception of ethical life as a normative standard for social critique. First, there is the perennial difficulty of drawing an 'ought' from an 'is'. For the desired end-state – namely, that each individual be able fully to realize her or his self in non-coercive relations of recognition – is ineradicably drawn from the existential conditions of identity development. Because I have no particular contribution to make to this broad debate, I will pass over it here. The second problem concerns the putative universalism of self-realization as a uniquely privileged normative telos. For as many eudaimonistic theorists have recently made clear, in particular Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self*, it appears that the specific goal of full individual self-realization is an understanding of the good life which is contextually particular to a specific development of Western thought. Furthermore, if Taylor is to be believed, there are a number of competing conceptions of self-realization which appear to be indistinguishable from the point of view of Honneth's formal conception of ethical life. From a different perspective such as Michel Foucault's, the telos of self-realization can also be seen as an historical product of a specific set of institutions and practices which have instantiated new, efficacious categories of subjectivity around the telos of self-realization. Thus the basic problem I am raising here is: how is it possible for Honneth to defend his implicit claim that uncoerced, full self-realization can serve as *the* critical yardstick for the social conditions of the good life *just because* it can be abstracted as a structurally necessary telos immanent in social relations of recognition?

I can think of three main strategies Honneth might adopt in order to establish self-realization as the telos of his formal conception of ethical life, and thus as the normative foundation of envisioned social critique. The first strategy would be a revised form of discourse ethics,

the second a revised form of historical, rational reconstruction, and the third one might call an anthropological ontology.

The first approach Honneth might take would be to try to defend the normative standpoint of the formal conception of ethical life by understanding it as a necessary part of the background conditions for a Habermasian-style discourse ethics. This approach would envision the anthropological preconditions of mutual recognition as additionally necessary conditions of possibility for engaging in moral discourse, beyond the exclusively linguistic and cognitive competencies required by Habermas' model. For on Honneth's account, Habermas' set of pragmatic presuppositions for communicative interaction is too thin and formal to account for the richer conceptions of positive liberty, of moral motivation and its link to social struggle, and of the ethically particular concerns bound up with the forms of recognition enabling both self-confidence and self-esteem. Such an approach, however, would seem to vitiate the priority of questions of the right over those of the good which Habermas considers to be a main tenet of discourse ethics.[2] Broadening Habermas' conception of autonomy to include all three of the stages of self-recognition would require admitting substantive issues concerning the particular care and esteem structures of a society into a discourse which is supposed to be narrowly constrained to universal moral questions while eschewing concrete questions of value. Alternatively, one might invert the directionality of Honneth's ontogenetic model by comprehending self-esteem as a precondition for self-respect, and thus moral autonomy.[3] Here one would be able to save the priority of the right, but at the expense of hollowing out the variegated conception of self-esteem as gained through one's productive contribution to solidaristically shared life-projects, since such concerns would need to be excluded in the symmetrical attribution of formal autonomy required in moral discourse. Thus, on this first approach, either Honneth must give up the defense of the formal conception of ethical life as independent of substantive interpretations of the good life – thus giving up on the first criterion of formal universality – or he must cede the richer notion of the good life that he sees as a distinct advantage of the formal conception – thus not meeting his second criterion.

The second approach – and the one that I believe most promising for realizing Honneth's stated intentions – would be to see the telos of non-coerced self-realization as the result of a Hegelian-style rational reconstruction of the immanent progress of history. Only at a certain point in history do concepts of identity development and authenticity begin to gain normative force in social conflicts, and this point is recognizably superior to those preceding it.[4] Although such a normative theory would acknowledge the historical particularity of Western conceptions of self-realization, it would claim that such a history can and should be seen as developmentally rational; that is, as a progressive unfolding of the ideal

of individual fulfillment in non-coercive social relations. Because each successive, significant transformation of the form of social organization could be understood as the result of a learning process resulting in a recognizably superior resolution of previous problems, the particular content of the reconstructed development would be shown to manifest a universal structure of developmental rationality – namely, the structure of self-realization in the three forms of intersubjective recognition. The trans-contextual force of such a reconstruction would depend, then, upon its rationality: namely, the extent to which it could coherently synthesize and interpret the relevant set of historical phenomena as a characteristic form of human progress meriting normative assent.[5]

Such a reconstructive grounding of the ideal of self-realization would clearly meet Honneth's second criterion: it would evince enough determinate content to specify the conditions of the good life to a greater extent than an abstract Kantian conception of autonomy. However, I do not believe that such an approach could, as easily, meet Honneth's first criterion: namely, that the formal conception of ethical life be a non-particularistic formulation of the enabling conditions for the good life. On the one hand, one would need to show that the structures of the formal conception were extant in some form, whether developed or latent, in most or all cultures. This question of universalism is a problem of empirical verification, and thus remains an open one. On the other hand, a deeper conceptual problem lies in the difficulty of showing that the formal conception of ethical life has picked out the *normatively valid* telos around which the legitimating reconstruction is built. Upon what grounds could the normative theorist claim that he or she has identified the single proper ideal to which we *should* assent? I don't think that this is simply a problem for moral skeptics, for there are any number of competing ideals of the good life, each of which appears to be tied to specific understandings of who we are and who we want to be. Here it is not a problem of choosing from amongst the ideals of various ethical communities within which individuals can achieve self-esteem through recognition, for Honneth has allowed for this particularistic dimension with his form/content distinction. The problem is rather to show that the telos of self-realization through intersubjective recognition *itself* should be the governing ideal of social organization. I don't believe that a simple appeal to the actual structures of identity development can answer to challengers who might ask: Why self-realization and not pious self-abnegation, or virtuous subservience to communal ends, or righteous obedience to the moral law, or maximization of the pleasure of others, etc.? All of these alternatives and more are live options in ethical theory today, and if one cedes that human nature is malleable, then one cannot simply appeal to the mere *universality* of structures of identity development in order to ground the telos of self-realization as *the* proper focus of social organization.

The third approach would ignore the ought/is problem altogether by simply claiming that the formal conception of ethical life, insofar as it is directly derived from the universal and essential features of any and all individual human development, must include the normative ideal of full self-realization. Thus all forms of social organization could be judged according to the degree to which they enable the greatest number of their members to achieve this ideal.[6] How strong such a normative grounding might be, however, would depend upon the extent to which appeals to ontological and metaphysical truths about the timeless essence of humanity could be argued for. Here, I believe, the same particularism problems that beset the second approach would reappear in a more forbidding manner. For this approach would require a strong metaphysical project, not in support of the claims to the *universality* of the structural conditions of healthy self-realization which rest on empirical results of the social sciences, but rather in order to back the *essentialistic* claim that the formal conception represents the uniquely proper normative ideal. While it may be true that all humans have an identifiable interest in the full development of their identities, the universal existence of this interest alone cannot ground its prioritization as the evaluative standard for analyzing and critiquing social pathologies. It seems that one would need recourse here to an anthropological ontology which could identify self-recognition as the essence of human nature. I am wary of the current viability of such a strong metaphysical project, particularly considering both the historical variability of ethical world-views and forms of social organization, and the difficulty of shielding such an approach from ideological projections of bias into the original account of human nature.[7]

Honneth has given us a highly informative and revealing description of a particular ethical ideal, but the question of how such a description might serve as the normative grounds for a diagnostic social philosophy that could transcend the limits of our own particular social forms remains open. Perhaps such a foundational and universalistic project of theoretically justifying normative claims against social patterns of disrespect is neither desirable nor necessary, given the strength of already extant intramundane protests against distorting forms of intersubjectivity. However, to acknowledge the contextual specificity of the formal conception of ethical life would take Honneth far from both the post-metaphysical reformulation of Kantian moral theory and the communitarian reliance on legitimating narratives that he seeks to steer a middle course between.

University of Kentucky, Department of Philosophy, Lexington, KY, USA

PSC

Notes

Earlier versions of this paper were read at the 34th annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, DePaul University, 13 October 1995, and at the Second Annual Midwest Critical Theory Roundtable, Saint Louis University, 17 September 1994. I would like to thank participants at both for their insightful comments.

1   Honneth's conception of social philosophy as a distinct endeavor has been elucidated most fully in his paper delivered during the 'Modernity and Ethics' panel at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) meeting, 12 October 1995. For my account of Honneth's program of social philosophy, I rely on that paper, as well as Honneth, 1994. But see also Honneth, 1995a, especially pp. xix–xxii, and Chapters 3, 13 and 14. Both Honneth and Rainer Forst stressed, in their respective responses to my paper at SPEP, the distinction between questions properly treated in moral theory as against those concerning social philosophy.

2   See in particular pp. 98–109 of Habermas, 1990a; pp. 175–84 of Habermas, 1990b; pp. 69–76 and 88–96 of Habermas, 1993b; and pp. 113–32 of Habermas, 1993a. Also helpful here is Rehg, 1994, especially Part II, pp. 91–178.

3   This option was suggested by Johanna Meehan in her response to my paper.

4   Alessandro Ferrara suggested this felicitous way of formulating the approach in response to my paper.

5   Honneth may be somewhat reticent to adopt such an approach, given that he criticizes the Frankfurt school's focus on deformations in modern rationality – in particular the dominance of instrumental rationality – for its blindness to social pathologies beyond those affecting human reason. 'Typical of the critical diagnoses of the present era carried out by this tradition, then, is the supposition that all pathologies or anomalies of social life can inevitably be measured only against the stage in the development of human rationality that has been reached at that particular time. . . . Such a perspective . . . is accompanied by the disadvantage that all those social pathologies which have nothing to do with the developmental level of rationality can no longer be brought into view at all. The tradition of the Frankfurt School must lack the critical-diagnostic sensory apparatus necessary to detect those disorders in social life which Durkheim, for instance, had in mind when he studied the process of individualization, because such phenomena do not result directly in changes in human reason' (Honneth, 1995a: xx). Here, however, I am suggesting that Honneth might adopt a rational reconstruction in order to ground normatively the formal conception of ethical life. This does not entail that the actual diagnoses of social pathologies need to focus only on deformations in rationality.

6   This third approach of an anthropological ontology was endorsed by Honneth in his response to my SPEP paper.

7   Both of these problems have been highlighted in debates concerning communitarianism.

PSC

Bibliography

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley. New York, NY: Random House.

Habermas, J. (1990a) 'Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification', trans. C. Lenhardt and S. W. Nicholsen, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1990b) 'Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action', trans. C. Lenhardt and S. W. Nicholsen, in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1993a) 'Lawrence Kohlberg and Neo-Aristotelianism', trans. C. Cronin, in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1993b) 'Remarks on Discourse Ethics', trans. C. Cronin, in *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Honneth, A. (1994) 'The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today', *Constellations* 1(2).

Honneth, A. (1995a) *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, trans. C. W. Wright. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Honneth, A. (1995b) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. J. Anderson. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Rehg, W. (1994) *Insight and Solidarity: A Study in the Discourse Ethics of Jürgen Habermas*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.