Debates over recognition have been among the more interesting in social and political philosophy in the last 20 years or so. This is perhaps due to the fact that the orientation in these debates has not been exclusively on finding answers to pressing normative issues in law, politics and society, but also on anthropological, psychological, and ontological questions as to our best accounts of the development of personal identity, the social conditions of autonomy and self-realization, and both our vulnerability to and dependence on others. This means that there is something for everyone in this debate. While normative theorists can import the vocabulary of recognition into their debates of choice, the more anthropologically and ontologically oriented can approach old and new philosophical problems through a new theoretical language.

Anyone who has read Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth’s co-authored book, *Redistribution or Recognition?* (2003), knows how much can go wrong in debating recognition when one author is mainly interested in criticizing the normative consequences of using the vocabulary of recognition in a quite narrow, ‘culturalistic’ way (Fraser), and the other is mainly interested in getting the social ontology of Critical Theory right (Honneth). Fraser vilified a culturalistic understanding of recognition, according to which claims for recognition are claims for the recognition of specific collective identities. But such an understanding of identity is not central to Honneth’s work at all. Still, Fraser attacked him for the fatal consequences of such an understanding of recognition for a Critical Social theory, which was alleged to have become blind to socioeconomic injustices. She got answers back from Honneth that were clearly unresponsive not just to her mistakes but to some of her sound analytical points as well, such as her justified critique of the devastating influence (albeit not in Honneth’s work) of all-too culturalist, socioeconomically blind understandings of recognition. That book—which is still one of the bestsellers from the by now considerable literature on recognition—was not exactly an advertisement for academic research into recognition. It left the reader with the impression that two of the main proponents in the debate were at cross-purposes with each other mainly because they failed to acknowledge that their respective interests in the subject were simply quite different. Not much genuine mutual recognition in that debate . . .

Simon Thompson’s study, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction*, is the first book-length introduction to the debate over recognition in critical social theory. Thompson patiently and competently analyses the theories of Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser and Charles Taylor. Thompson’s book is not only a good introduction for use in advanced undergraduate courses. It is also a highly welcome addition to the book collection of all those who work in social and political theory and philosophy, since it excels at giving an
excellent overview and analysis of the main positions, arguments, and critiques in the
debate between and over these three important social theorists. Thompson is precise and
fair in his analysis of the work of the three authors and it is refreshingly hard to pin down
on whose side his sympathies lie.

It is fair to say that the parts on Honneth and Fraser are better than the parts on Taylor. This
is understandable for at least two reasons. First, Taylor has written much less on
recognition than the other two authors have, which at times forces Thompson to
reconstruct Taylor’s position from writings in which recognition plays only a minor role.
Second, Taylor’s reflections on recognition are not directly informed by Honneth’s
comprehensive theory, which appeared after the first publication of Taylor’s essay. Fraser’s
account has been influenced by Honneth’s conceptual decisions and she has entered into a
book-length discussion with him on recognition, which makes it much easier to compare
these two. Still, it is understandable why Taylor was included: he in a way started the
recent debate, he helps Thompson build a bridge to issues of multiculturalism that
Honneth especially has always struggled with, and he is simply one of the most well-
known contemporary philosophers in the Anglo-American world.

The book starts with a lucid introduction in which the rise of recognition is
reconstructed from changes in the landscape of solidarity in modern societies. Thompson
rightly claims that it ‘has seen a shift away from ideas of class, equality, economy and
nation towards those of identity, difference, culture and ethnicity’ (p. 3). He argues that
Taylor, Fraser and Honneth can help us understand how this change has come about and,
more importantly, that they have developed theories of justice that answer to the new
constellation: ‘each of them articulates a political theory of recognition which is based on
the premises that a just society would be one in which everyone gets due recognition. In
such a society, in other words, all individuals and groups would enjoy the practical
acknowledgement that they deserve’ (ibid.). Thompson is right to stress that this claim sits
at the heart of the accounts of recognition he discusses. Critics such as Brian Barry have
branded the politics of recognition as a chief danger for the just social and socio-economic
ordering of society, but have not considered the possibility that theories of recognition may
be seen as theories of justice, and may be better suited to answer the nature of many
contemporary political claims than the liberal-individualist framework that has dominated
discussions of justice after World War II. Some famous examples of injustices related to
mis-/recognition help Thompson bring this point home: Rosa Parks in the bus, the
headscarf in France, same-sex marriage in the USA. They concern identity claims rather
than socio-economic claims; they concern questions of inclusion within the symbolic order
of society; they concern the place of ‘difference’ in society (pp. 4–8).

The captivating introductory chapter is followed by three chapters that analyse the
three authors’ stances on ‘recognition as love’, ‘recognition as respect’ and ‘recognition as
esteem’ (Thompson here follows Honneth’s three basic types of recognition). Three further
chapters follow on central themes within the recognition debate: ‘recognition and
redistribution’ (The Fraser-Honneth debate), ‘recognition and democracy’ (a much
neglected relation, Thompson rightly claims), and ‘struggles for recognition’ (Honneth’s
account of the emancipatory grammar of social conflicts). The organization of Thompson’s
book again makes it clear that it was really the work of Honneth and Fraser that
determined the architecture of the book: in the last three chapters, there is room for Taylor
only in the democracy chapter. The book ends with an all-too-short conclusion in which it
becomes clear that Thompson cannot live up to his promise from the introduction ‘to
determine whether one theory stands head and shoulders above the rest, or whether it
may be possible to synthesize the best elements from each in a single unified political

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theory of recognition’ (p. 18). And that is not surprising since Thompson’s strengths are situated elsewhere: comparing positions, giving an overview, separating reason from rhetoric. Given the nature of the book the promise from the introduction reads as a leftover from a much earlier stage in the project, in which Thompson aimed for a unified theory of recognition.

The three chapters on love, respect and esteem are excellent introductory material that could help structure the first half of a good academic course on the subject. I will only discuss the chapter on love, since the main themes from the chapters on respect and esteem resurface in later chapters of the book, which I will discuss shortly.

In the chapter on love, Thompson starts from Honneth’s claim that, as Thompson paraphrases it, ‘the experience of recognition is essential to create and sustain human identity’ and that ‘if relations of recognition are broken, damaged or severely distorted, then psychological harm will result’ (p. 20). In light of results from research in developmental psychology especially, Honneth indeed argues that, throughout our lives, the experience of continued love and care from significant others, starting with the mother or others in the primary role of care-giver, is essential for the development of basic self-confidence and confidence in others. Where it is absent, self-confidence and confidence in others will be harmed.

Many critics have pointed out that Honneth’s strongly psychological account is problematic, particularly where his understanding of serious harm to self-confidence and confidence in others are concerned. If misrecognition is bound to harm the self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem of the misrecognized, and some measure of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem is a condition of engaging in struggles for greater recognition, then shouldn’t we conclude that as soon as a serious misrecognition of someone’s need for love and care (respect and esteem) has occurred, her capacity for action must have been harmed to an extent that makes a struggle for recognition practically impossible? At several places in his oeuvre, Honneth has made remarks as to how social movements may help misrecognized persons develop some resilience against misrecognition that eventually could prepare them for entering further struggles for recognition. But these remarks are sparse and the problem a serious one for Honneth’s theory, which is in the end mainly interested in the question as to how victims of misrecognition can overcome their misrecognition through social struggles.

Nancy Fraser has argued against Honneth that he deduces political conclusions—with regard to our subjective rights and the social conditions of self-realization for instance—from psychological premises about self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Fraser is worried that Honneth ‘blames the victim’, i.e., she claims that Honneth’s ‘psychologization’ of recognition theory reduces mis/recognition ‘to a matter of individual attitudes, [and that there] . . . will be a temptation to try to blame the victim for their feelings of self-contempt’ (p. 31). Thompson shows that Fraser is right here to the extent that her argument is based in an insight that recognition and misrecognition ‘are rooted in social and political institutions’ (p. 40). According to both Fraser and Thompson, what counts is not whether subjects experience misrecognition but whether the institutional order in society is causally related to such experiences occurring. The institutional order can be arranged politically, subjective experiences cannot. So in many respects, Fraser ‘wins’ the comparison with Honneth in this chapter.

The fifth chapter of the book addresses the ‘Recognition or Redistribution’ debate between Honneth and Fraser. Thompson agrees with Fraser that not all claims for redistribution are best understood as claims for a particular kind of recognition. This means that Thompson cannot accept Honneth’s strong ontological claim that all struggles for justice in the social

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world are in one sense or another struggles for the recognition of identity. He opts for Frasers alternative of methodological perspectival pluralism, which is to say that if we want to engage in a critical theoretical analyses of injustices, we will have to decide, on a case-by-case scenario, which methodological means, including which exact social theory, we will use in order to make explicit the injustices involved. I think that Fraser and Thompson really have a much stronger position than Honneth here, who has had a hard time to clearly distinguish between various types of injustice ever since he first presented his theory of recognition. Even though he has written on a wide range of issues—from questions regarding the place of the family in the capitalist order to issues of multiculturalism and the critique of ideology—the grammar of his, in the end mainly psychologically grounded, theory of recognition inevitably draws him to questions regarding identity development and the conditions of personal well-being of members of society. As important as these questions are, there are other, more systemic, economic and political questions that Honneth hardly addresses in his writings. It seems likely that the grounding of his theory in developmental and social psychological arguments is partly responsible for this.

Thompson opts for Fraser’s methodological pluralism. Where Fraser used a dualistic approach in her earlier work—analysing justice questions both from a recognitive and a redistributive point of view—she has since added a third, political point of view. Thompson must have had the bad luck of not being able to include Fraser’s new insights, which were developed and published while he must have been completing his book around 2005. However, in Chapter 6 Thompson does a good job at reconstructing Fraser’s work on democracy in ways that match well with her later work on this (pp. 139–43).

The chapter on democracy is important, simply because, to put it mildly, the relation between recognition and democracy has not been on the top of the list of concerns for leading theorists. Thompson confronts all three authors with a variant of Rousseau’s formulation in the Social Contract (Book II, Chapter 7) of a fundamental paradox of politics: Which comes first? A good people, or good law? In order to have good law, we need a good people. In order to have good people, we need good laws. Thompson claims that his three authors are confronted with a certain circularity in their understanding of democracy as a practice of recognition: ‘Is democracy necessary in order to determine what recognition is due, or is recognition necessary before democracy can exist?’ (p. 157). He could have and probably should have stressed that his own acknowledgment that the main theorists of recognition have not shown much interest in developing explicitly political theories of recognition does not sit easily with the title of his book. But more importantly, Thompson does a good job at suggesting that in the current literature, Honneth’s theory harbours the most promising argument for dealing with the paradox. A certain type of recognition (egalitarian, inclusive) is needed in order to make a certain type of democratic order possible (egalitarian, inclusive). Once it is established, democratic encounters over the definition of recognition are needed in order to determine the practical meaning of civic bonds along lines of civic trust, rights, and solidarity. In that sense, as a good Hegelian, Honneth seems not so much caught in a circle, but rather in a spiral.

The last chapter of Thompson’s book is about this spiral, which for Honneth is a spiral of moral progress through struggles for recognition. This account of the possibility and nature of moral progress is rightly the most celebrated element of Honneth’s theory. Here we see a bold and courageous theorist at work, who challenges the widespread liberal agnosticism with regard to conceptions of ethical life for the whole of society. It is also, and for good reasons, the most controversial element of Honneth’s work.

As one of the very few social and political philosophers working today, Honneth uses the notion of a ‘provisional end-state’ of social and political struggles over justice. He
claims that, given the shared value-horizon in our liberal-democratic societies, struggles for recognition in them are directed to reaching that end-state. The most important traits of that end-state are that all members are recognized as autonomous and individualized beings who are granted the love, respect and esteem that they are due, and that the relations in which they stand enable them to develop relations to self and others that are free from pain, i.e. free from unwarranted forms of misrecognition.

Thompson’s conclusions in this last chapter are that Honneth’s account suffers from at least three problems. First, his account as to how the subjective experience of misrecognition can spark struggles for recognition has hardly been developed. Thompson rightly concludes that Honneth needs a more articulated account of the emotions and their relations to our historically embedded sense of justice. Second, Thompson develops a refined argument concerning a tension in Honneth’s work between an account of the emotions as an uncorrupted source of knowledge about justice/injustice on the one hand, and as dependent for their interpretation on mediating institutions such as social movements and the public sphere on the other. The tension here is between the concept of an uncorrupted emotion and one mediated through a mediating institution, hence mediated through relations of power. Third, Thompson identifies several problems with the teleological structure of Honneth’s account of moral progress. Here he makes use of James Tully’s important agonistic insight that struggles for recognition will not and should not cease in societies that guarantee civic freedom. The articulation of a provisional end-state of history, even when undertaken in as careful a manner as Honneth does, suggests that we in a way already know which claims for recognition are justified and which claims are not. The question then is who that ‘we’ is, and whether it really includes all.

I found the very brief conclusion—not much more than a summary really—of Thompson’s book quite disappointing. After all the material that had been analyzed and discussed in Thompson’s remarkably fair and neutral manner, I had expected an account of the limits and scope of the politics of recognition. I think that this expectation was warranted given the excellent first chapter of the book, which, as I have mentioned, masterfully relates the theory of recognition to real social and political questions of the past decades. An outlook on contemporary and future political questions that theorists of recognition have not discussed to the full yet, such as issues regarding environmentalism, cosmopolitanism and globalization, would have given Thompson the opportunity to synthesize the results of his careful assessments of the three theories and give a sketch of a theory of his own. But maybe I am just expecting too much here. The main task that Thompson set himself was to present a critical introduction to the political theory of recognition. The result is impressive and I will use the book in advanced undergraduate courses and recommend it as an invaluable handbook to anyone doing research in this field.

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