

University of Tartu  
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics

**The Concept of Recognition in Contemporary Social Philosophy:  
A Critical Perspective on the Connection between the Struggle for  
Recognition and Emancipation in Axel Honneth and Judith Butler**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

Viktorija Kozlova

Supervisor: Siobhan Kattago  
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## **Abstract**

The concept of recognition has attracted wide-spread interest in social and political philosophy during the last decades. This thesis critically examines the notion of recognition in social and political theory concentrating on the works of Axel Honneth, the author who has, arguably, presented the most comprehensive social theory of recognition to date. The thesis reconstructs Honneth's theory of recognition in light of the connection between recognition and social change, which, for him, is understood as driven by the struggle for recognition. Drawing from the works of Judith Butler, I emphasize the ambivalent character of recognition through its connection to subject formation. Following Butler, it is argued that before a person can enjoy recognition, they must first become recognizable, which in turn is conditioned by the existent dynamics of power. As a result, I conclude that particular expressions of the desire for recognition are significantly limited in their emancipatory potential.

## Introduction

In contemporary political philosophy, the topic of recognition took the spotlight in the 1990s in the writings of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. However, in the history of philosophical and political thought, recognition had already been problematized much earlier, with one of the most influential accounts provided by G.W.F. Hegel, from whom many contemporary approaches have emerged, most notably those of Taylor and Honneth. Indeed, it was from Hegel's philosophy that the very idea of recognition became a major topic of debate in contemporary political philosophy.

The thesis will explore the connection of recognition with subject formation, and the effect that power inflicts on the subject. It will be shown that recognition needs to be understood in connection with power as both forming the subject against the background of certain social norms, as well as the result of recognition happening in accordance with existing power relations. I suggest that existing power structures and social norms that are constitutive of the subject are to be rearticulated and reformed, rather than that social injustices are to be resolved through more or better recognition.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel introduced the concept of recognition as a peculiar form in the development of self-consciousness. Recognition, according to Hegel, is found in the reflexive orientation of consciousness towards itself that is mediated through recognition by the other person.<sup>1</sup> Consciousness strives for awareness of itself recognized by others, but for this, the other must be recognized as a competent judge. Heikki Ikaheimo and Arto Laitinen distinguish three different aspects of "recognition": identification, acknowledgment, and recognition.<sup>2</sup> In the proposed classification of the different senses of the word, 'recognition', identification denotes taking B as "the individual thing it is, as a thing with some particular features, and as a thing belonging to a certain genus."<sup>3</sup> Acknowledgment is defined as normative entities "the possible B's are things like norms, principles, rules, claims, reasons, values [...]" and the possible X's are things like 'valid', 'good', 'genuine.'<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon of recognition, on the other hand, can only be understood in the sense that only persons are recognized. In the general sense, what Ikaheimo and Laitinen understand as recognition or a recognitive attitude is precisely recognizing the other as a person. Because they also take recognition to

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., Miller, A. V., & Findlay, J. N., 1977., *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ikaheimo, H., A. Laitinen, 2007, "Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement and Recognitive Attitudes Towards Persons," in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.): Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 33–56.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p. 36.

be dialogical, in the Hegelian sense, to be recognized by another requires that the recognizee take the recognizer as having made a competent judgment. Hence recognition in the general sense can be formulated as “taking someone as a person, the content of which is understood [note: *content of person*, where *person* is a term; understanding the *content of person* is thus to understand what it designates] and which is accepted [the content of the term] by the other person.”<sup>5</sup> By building on Hegel’s idea that the individual subject is constructed through the mutual recognition of two conscious subjects, most contemporary theories of recognition highlight the importance of the recognition process as being possible only between two equal and free individuals, which connects the idea of recognition with the idea of justice. As such, the aspect of the recognition of the other as a person that is relevant for this thesis’s discussion carries the presupposition that the other whom you recognize is worthy of the same rights, respect, and acknowledgment in virtue of their humanity.

Consequently, insofar as subjects are constructed by recognition, the non-recognition or misrecognition by others, as Charles Taylor argues, “can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning one in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.”<sup>6</sup> This way the absence of proper recognition can be interpreted as a form of oppression and injustice. For Axel Honneth, whose theories of recognition are the primary focus of this thesis, the forms of non-recognition and misrecognition include violations of physical integrity, restrictions, or deprivation of a person of her rights, and therefore, a restriction her civil and moral responsibility, and contempt for the value preferences of the individual, her worldview and way of life. Accordingly, recognition manifests itself in the recognition of the physical sovereignty of the individual, in the recognition of a person as a citizen, a member of the community and, therefore, a participant in public communication, endowed with rights and responsibilities, in the recognition of a person in his individuality. Both psychologically and morally, it is important for a person to feel not only autonomous, but also accepted as a unique person, as an object of solidarity of others, and this feeling is an important factor in both personal identity and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Given this, for Honneth, injustices, which are seen to be a product of misrecognition or non-recognition, are to be solved by more or better recognition. More specifically, it is the moral injury inflicted by non or misrecognition that acts as catalyst for a struggle for recognition, which, if successful, ensures the change the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, C., 1992, “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, A. Gutmann (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Honneth, A., (1996), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge (MA): MIT University Press.

initial conditions in which it was possible for mis or non-recognition to occur – thus an existent injustice is corrected.<sup>8</sup>

The current thesis aims to provide a criticism of Honneth's theory of the connection between recognition and social change that is driven by the struggle for recognition, which is a result of moral injury from mis or non-recognition. I present a reconstruction of Honneth's argument, suggesting that what underlines Honneth's main point is the view of recognition as a receptive process. This means that recognition is seen as a normative process of properly evaluating the presence and character of specific qualities key to a person's self-understanding within the scope of a relevant mode of recognition.<sup>9</sup>

The author challenges this notion by drawing from the works of Judith Butler, which problematize the status of recognition solely as a normative process, arguing that it also possesses an essential cognitive component. The cognitive component understood as recognizability — “those general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place”<sup>10</sup> — is seen as being dependent of the social context and acts as a framework determining the content of what can be recognized and the ways in which it happens. Following Butler, I argue that before a person can enjoy recognition, she needs to first become recognizable. Furthermore, this then is examined in relation to the underlying notion of subject formation as being a site of action for power. Finally, I argue that particular expressions of the desire for recognition are the result of this process, and as such, significantly limit the emancipatory potential of recognition. Case examples are presented in which moral injury is insufficient to trigger a struggle for recognition, and which is characterized by an absence of motivational force to constitute a moral injury, despite there being a situation facilitating mis or non-recognition.

Structurally the thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a general overview of the concept of recognition in the Hegelian tradition, with a detailed elaboration of the theory of recognition and its relation to social progress as found in the works of Axel Honneth. The chapter outlines the premises for Honneth's argument regarding the struggle for recognition (which if successful results in the correction of social injustices) as resulting from moral injury inflicted by lack of or improper recognition. Within this chapter, the importance of proper recognition and various modes of recognition are also considered in relation to the writings of Charles Taylor. It is suggested that Honneth's

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 171-180.

<sup>9</sup> Honneth, A. (2004), “Recognition as Ideology,” in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 323–347.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, J. (2006), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. New York: Verso Books, p. 6.

account rests on an understanding of recognition as a receptive process through which a person is evaluated in terms of their possession and character of specific qualities corresponding to the three modes of recognition: recognition of rights, love, and esteem.

The second chapter aims to problematize Honneth's theory of recognition by examining recognition as both a cognitive and normative process, as suggested by Judith Butler.<sup>11</sup> The chapter focuses on the critical exchange between Butler and Honneth in 2021,<sup>12</sup> highlighting the issues that arise when recognition is considered in its connection to the conditions of subjection as mediated by the relations of power.

Building on Butler's insights, the third chapter presents an argument regarding, first, the insufficiency of moral injury being considered as a catalyst for a struggle for recognition; secondly, the limited scope of the emancipatory potential of struggles for recognition envisioned in the way proposed by Honneth. Doing so, involves an examination of a desire for recognition in terms of the conditions in which it arises and factors shaping its specific manifestations.

The conclusion once again outlines the general argument presented in the paper while also sketching out possible resolutions to the presented problems by re-evaluating the relationship between recognition and social change.

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, J. (2021), *Recognition and the Social Bond: A Response to Axel Honneth*, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 31-55.

<sup>12</sup> Ikäheimo, H., Lepold, K., & Stahl, T. (Eds.). (2021). *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press., pp. 21-69.



## **Chapter I: From Hegel’s Concept of Recognition to Axel Honneth’s Struggle for Recognition as the ‘Moral Grammar of Social Conflict’**

The following chapter will provide a concise overview of the notion of recognition as it appears in one of most influential accounts presented by contemporary thinkers, specifically Axel Honneth – as a receptive model of recognition. Honneth’s theory is reconstructed in such a way as to explain how moral injury, as something that occurs as a result of non-or misrecognition, can be seen to initiate the struggle for recognition, which in turn, may result in the correction of social ills (when the conditions for the proper recognition of those who were previously subject to moral injury are established).

### **1.1 Hegelian Legacy: Recognition and the Intersubjective Conception of Selfhood**

Descartes’ philosophy that posited the starting point in the cogito principle created an influential legacy for an atomistic conception of selfhood.<sup>13</sup> This was also influential for some of the political philosophy thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke, who in their contract theories largely relied on the notion of self-interest as the guiding principle behind the establishment of the social contract and the binding of the persons in society<sup>14</sup>. Contrary to this, intersubjective theories of selfhood posit that there is no self without the other, and that selfhood is first found in the encounter with others<sup>15</sup>.

Most contemporary theories of recognition are influenced by Hegel’s philosophy; however, Hegel himself heavily draws on Johann Gottlieb Fichte,<sup>16</sup> whose notion of “recognition” was already important in the philosophy of Fichte. Fichte posited that self-consciousness becomes aware of itself only by being called upon by another self-consciousness. Under the notion of recognition, Fichte understands a certain mutuality of relationship between two subjects – or two self-consciousnesses – that limit their own manifestation of freedom for the sake of the freedom of the other.<sup>17</sup> That is, for any rational being, I recognize the right to freedom only when I restrict my own freedom. The relationship of mutual recognition is both the basis of an identity of an individual – an awareness of oneself as an individual actor, as well as the basis for legal relations. Thus,

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<sup>13</sup> McQueen P., “Social and Political Recognition,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Accessed 05.03.2023. URL = <[https://iep.utm.edu/recog\\_sp/](https://iep.utm.edu/recog_sp/)>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Breazeale, D., “Johann Gottlieb Fichte”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/johann-fichte/>>.

mutual recognition, in which an individual becomes aware of herself through another individual as a free individual and, at the same time, limited in her freedom by another's freedom, is the basis for the possibility of society.

For Fichte, recognition was mostly confined to the relations in the legal realm and to mutual moral recognition.<sup>18</sup> Recognition for Hegel still encompasses the mutual recognition between individuals as free but also bound to one another by the legal relations that are tied to the two-sided restrictions on one self's freedom. Selfhood is reached not by an atomistic individual that then enters the relationship with other individuals but rather by intersubjective recognition: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged [*als ein Anerkanntes*]."<sup>19</sup> However, in a wider sense, recognition is also described by Hegel as a movement, both in the development of individual self-consciousness at different stages as well as the position of an individual in the community. Thus, recognition can be seen not only as an affirmation of one's existence as a free self-consciousness, but also as recognition between an individual and community. In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel defines three spheres of recognition as love, law, and an ethical state, which are necessary for an individual to actualize her autonomy and freedom.<sup>20</sup>

Crucial to this, is the widely discussed metaphor of the master-slave dialectic: the positions of the two individuals in the metaphor bound in the struggle for recognition are determined by the willingness to risk their own lives to establish themselves as free, autonomous subjects.

In so far as it's the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so, the second kind of action, action on its own part; is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life. Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing, moment, that it is only pure being-for-self.<sup>21</sup>

Alexandre Kojève interprets the scene of this struggle of recognition as follows: the struggle for recognition as inevitable in the transformation of a violent world, in which the

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<sup>18</sup> Siep, L., 2010, "Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Contemporary Practical Philosophy" in *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary perspectives*. Schmidt am Busch, H.-C., Zurn, C. F. (eds.): Plymouth: Lexington Books, pp. 107-1028.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., Houlgate, S., (2005) *The Hegel Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid pp. 359-398.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel, G. W. F., Miller, A. V., & Findlay, J. N., 1977., *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Pp. 113-114.

action “will begin with the act of imposing oneself on the “first” other man one meets. And since this other, if he is (or more exactly, if he wants to be, and believes to be) a human being, must himself do the same thing, the first anthropogenetic action necessarily takes the form of a fight.”<sup>22</sup> However, at the end of the struggle, neither the master nor the slave achieve recognition. The necessary pre-condition of a successful process of recognition, is that the individuals bound in the process are equal. In the case of a master and the slave, the one-sided recognition of the master cannot be deemed successful as the master does not see the slave as equal and as equally worthy of recognition. Thus, considering that mutual recognition between free and equal individuals as well as the recognition of the individual by their community and state is the condition for freedom and right, this, for Hegel is not possible in the relations of domination.

To frame the problem in a different way: the example of the master-slave dialectic as the struggle for recognition depicted by Hegel creates a dilemma, precisely since the criterion of recognition as occurring between equals is never fulfilled. As such, if attempts of applying the logic of recognition in Hegel’s example are to be made to conceptualize the struggle for recognition as a social process, modifications are required to be made. These are found in contemporary theorists of recognition, who draw on Hegel, most notably, Axel Honneth.

## **1.2 Axel Honneth: The Receptive Model of Recognition and the Three Modes of Recognition**

In his seminal work in the field of social and political philosophy *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Axel Honneth seeks to explain the importance of the process of recognition for social progress and explicate the psychological/phenomenological affect that leads individuals and groups to initiate the morally motivated struggle for recognition. Honneth starts his study with young Hegel’s *Jena Writings* and the metaphysically explained struggle for recognition between individuals - recognition that can only be final if both of the agents perceive a free and autonomous individual in the other.<sup>23</sup> However, according to Honneth, the metaphysical premises of Hegel’s theory are inadequate for a contemporary study of the process of recognition and social conflicts.<sup>24</sup> To develop further Hegel’s theory of recognition, Honneth strengthens it

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<sup>22</sup> Kojève, A. 1980. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Honneth, A., (1996), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge (MA): MIT University Press., pp. 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

with empirical research implementing the psychological/phenomenological studies of G. H. Mead that explore the connection of different modes of recognition on different levels and the adjacent negative feeling caused in the person by mis or non-recognition. In doing so, Honneth aims to provide an empirical grounding for Hegel's theory of recognition.<sup>25</sup>

It should be noted that the importance of recognition in this view stems from the basic idea of the intersubjective account of the self (or subjectivity). As Honneth contends: "the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee."<sup>26</sup>

Following Hegel and Mead, Honneth defines three spheres of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity<sup>27</sup>. While the three spheres of recognition exist on three different levels of social interaction with completely different structures and needs of recognition that are being met, they are nonetheless connected by the "appeal to the same mechanism of reciprocal recognition."<sup>28</sup>

1. Love is not to be taken in the restricted sense of romantic love, but rather refers to "primary relationships insofar as they [...] are constituted by strong emotional attachment among a small number of people."<sup>29</sup> The examples could be a relationship between a parent and child, friendships, or romantic relationships between lovers. The relationships are defined by "dependence on each other"<sup>30</sup> and satisfy the feeling of basic self-confidence. Love provides the basis for other forms of recognition and is the strived for ideal of recognition that individuals hope to achieve in their relations with others.<sup>31</sup> Although this is an unachievable ideal, it acts as a catalyst for the struggle for recognition in social interactions.

Honneth posits that the relationships of love facilitate a balance between "symbiotic self-sacrifice and individual self-assertion"<sup>32</sup>, that very much follows the general structure of the relationships of mutual recognition, within which both individuals simultaneously practice their freedom and limit it in a way so as not to encroach on the freedom of the other. The example that Honneth discusses the most concerning the love mode of recognition is that of a mother and the child: through learning that the other person does not belong to you fully, the child received a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-107.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p. 96.

foundation of the understanding of mutually cognitive relationships that “constitutes the psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect.”<sup>33</sup>

2. Rights, or recognition in the legal sphere, follows the structure of reciprocal recognition in the sense that “we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know [...] what various normative obligations we must keep vis-a-vis others.”<sup>34</sup> Only in the case that the individual sees herself as a bearer of equal rights which are to be respected by other members of the community, and the realization that she also has normative obligations towards other equal members. Through recognition in the sphere of rights the individual gains self-respect. The denial of recognition in the sphere of rights excludes the individual from the moral society of and denies her the possibility to be an active and equal member of that society. It can be generalized as the acknowledgment of a person that is equal to all other persons in the face of the law and the consideration of her obligations to society at large as well as the consideration that the other persons have an obligation towards her. The lack of recognition in this mode leads to an injury to the self-respect of a person and deprives her of the two-way moral responsibility between herself and others.

However, since legal recognition posits that this person is like all the other persons and deserves respect in accordance with their humanity, it lacks the recognition of a person in their particularity. Considering that “one necessarily shares the capacities thus entailed with all of one’s fellow citizens, one cannot yet, as a legal person, relate positively to those of one’s characteristics that precisely distinguish one from one’s partners in interaction.”<sup>35</sup> This leads to the conception of the third mode of recognition – solidarity, which is aimed at satisfying the need for the recognition of difference.

3. The sphere of recognition referred to by Honneth as solidarity or esteem is directed at the “particular qualities that characterize people in their personal difference.”<sup>36</sup> While the relations of recognition in the spheres of love and rights are directed at universal features, esteem or solidarity “demands a social medium that must be able to express the characteristic differences between human subjects in a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid pp. 106-107.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

universal, and more specifically, intersubjectively obligatory way.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, this mode of reciprocal recognition, presupposes a certain social context, in which the members form a “community of value.”<sup>38</sup> In terms of the recognition of groups, it can be explicated as the acceptance of their way of life, concerning individuals – the perception of their “achievements or abilities as valuable by other members of society.”<sup>39</sup> Individuals gain self-esteem through the recognition of their contributions to society at large; however, this necessarily happens within a certain ‘value horizon.’ Thus, along with Honneth, we can conceptualize the struggle for recognition in the mode of social-esteem as a demand of their way of life to be recognized as valid for groups, or a demand for recognizing their contributions as valuable for individuals.

The three modes of recognition are all necessary for self-actualization and the development of full autonomy; however, they are not equal in terms of the moral obligation they demand from the members of society. Love “may be legitimately expected of subjects only in those cases in which mutual bonds rest on an affective foundation”<sup>40</sup>, i.e., in close personal relationships such as that of family and friendship. “Moral respect [...] designates a form of recognition that can be expected of all subjects equally”<sup>41</sup>, such that all persons are seen to have equal rights. “In the case of esteem [...] it seems to be the case that the moral action corresponding to it possesses an obligating character only within the framework of concrete communities.”<sup>42</sup>

The ways in which these different modes of recognition generate a particular type and scope of moral obligation (being derived from one’s need for recognition) is dependent on both their relationship to one another and the objects towards which they are directed. In intimate relationships the need for recognition typically takes the form of bringing forth newly developed or previously unconsidered needs by appeal to the mutually attested love to demand a different or expanded kind of care. In the sphere of modern law, it means including those previously excluded based on terms of equal rights. In the sphere of esteem, individuals bring forth neglected or underappreciated activities to demand social esteem.<sup>43</sup>

Moral respect, as the recognition of someone as a free and autonomous being capable of moral judgement in virtue of their humanity, is characterized by its universal scope of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 128.

<sup>40</sup> Honneth, A., & Farrell, J. (1997). Recognition and Moral Obligation. *Social Research*, 64(1), 16–35, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Honneth, A. (2003) “Redistribution as Recognition: A Response to Nancy Fraser,” in N. Fraser/A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, New York: Verso, pp. 110–197., p. 144.

application (to all beings that can potentially be recognized as subjects) and the corresponding universality of this demand (from all subjects). This ‘minimal’ mode of recognition thus can be seen as necessarily preceding all other or, alternatively, as always being implied by them.

Esteem or solidarity, on the other hand, because of its specific focus on particularity, i.e., features that are not universal to all subjects, and dependence on the presence of specific value frameworks and social context, is significantly narrower in the scope of its demand.

Finally, love, which is the most restrictive in scope, appeals to both universality – it implies recognition of someone as a free agent and whose freedom is restricted by their recognition of the freedom of another; and extreme particularity – rather than being concerned with the subject in virtue of them possessing specific features that may be common across various subjects, it singles out one specific subject.

What, however, is key to all these modes of recognition is that they are directed towards particular features (with the possible exception of love, as it is directed towards the concrete subject in its totality) of the subject being recognized. In one of his later articles, Honneth sums up that “we are to understand ‘recognition’ as a behavioural reaction in which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities that we have learned to perceive, to the extent to which we are integrated into the second nature of our lifeworld.”<sup>44</sup> What is of central importance is that recognition is a public act because it involves demonstrating to the other that the relevant features are being recognized (which, in essence, is the basic feature of recognition in Hegel’s model). As Honneth emphasizes:

“in our lifeworld, we, the children of modernity, have learned to perceive in other human subjects three potential evaluative qualities to which we can respond appropriately with the relevant recognitional behaviour, according to the kind of relationship in question; what we then do, in such acts of recognition, involves publicly making explicit the knowledge that we have acquired in the process of socialization.”<sup>45</sup>

Recognition, for him, is both an intentional moral act (in as far as it is always public) and is also specifically a receptive act, meaning that in the process of recognition, we do not attribute qualities to individuals, which were not there beforehand, but merely respond to the already existing qualities and abilities, granting them certain status. For Honneth, the process of recognition is always directed at “the qualities already possessed by a person are somehow strengthened or manifested publicly as a secondary matter.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense morally justified

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<sup>44</sup> Honneth, A. (2002) “Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions,” *Inquiry*, 45: 499–519, p. 513.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* 512.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

recognition happens when we “react in a correct or appropriate way to the reasons contained in the evaluative qualities that human beings possess in different respects.”<sup>47</sup>

Cases of non or misrecognition are therefore seen as instances where one fails to fulfil their moral obligations within the scope of a particular mode of recognition. One thus fails to react correctly to the presence of the qualities with which the other person is characterized.

### **1.3 Misrecognition and Non-Recognition as a Moral Injury – Recognition becoming Political**

Before elaborating further on the ways in which misrecognition or non-recognition can occur, and specifically, the way in which one may learn that they are being subject to it, it may be useful to briefly turn to another influential contemporary thinker, who has extensively written on the topic of recognition – Charles Taylor.

As previously explicated in Honneth’s theory, the moral demands and scope of application for various modes of recognition can be either universal or restricted to particulars. While the first case is indiscriminate in its application and does not assume any particular subject, the second instance, relates to qualities that one possesses and acknowledges as possessing, which at the same time are seen as key for others to acknowledge and respond to in a specific manner. These qualities can be seen as being crucial to one’s conception of their self. Failure by someone to meet either of the moral demands constitutes a case of non- or misrecognition.

The way how misrecognition and non-recognition becomes politically significant, is explicated by Taylor in his chapter “The Politics of Recognition,” in which he considers two related, yet necessarily different understandings of recognition within the political dimension: ‘the politics of difference’ and ‘the politics of equal dignity’.<sup>48</sup> Taylor traces the emergence of both understandings and the possibility for recognition, and in turn, mis or nonrecognition, becoming a meaningful political term to two key developments associated with the transition to modernity: the obsolescence of the notion of honor predicated on the collapse of pre-modern social hierarchies,<sup>49</sup> and the emergence of a new concept of identity<sup>50</sup>.

Taylor stresses that in pre-modern hierarchical societies both identity and honor were necessarily tied to ones standing within the fixed social hierarchy. Recognition was therefore

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, C., 1994. “The Politics of Recognition.” In: *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 26-27.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 28.



granted simply through reference to the belongingness to a particular social class, a position which was most frequently inherited and naturalized<sup>51</sup>. Similarly, it was also not meaningful to speak of someone's individual identity outside of this position. For one to be endowed with honor, it required others being deprived of such an opportunity with the differential treatment of persons served as the underlying foundation of this principle<sup>52</sup>.

However, as old hierarchies became inadequate with changing social conditions, the concept of honor became redundant. According to Taylor, what has later developed into the 'politics of equal dignity' was the emergence of the universalized notion of human or civic dignity. Found in the writings of such modern philosophers as Kant, dignity, unlike honor, was something that everyone shared in virtue of them having the capacity for reasoning: "what commanded respect in us was our status as rational agents, capable of directing our lives through principles. Something like this has been the basis for our intuitions of equal dignity ever since"<sup>53</sup> and "With the move from honour to dignity has come a politics of universalism, emphasizing the equal dignity of all citizens, and the content of this politics has been the equalization of rights and entitlements"<sup>54</sup>.

In parallel Taylor highlights a different trend, which also stems from the changes in the social order: the appearance of new conceptions of identity and authenticity. Invoking Rousseau<sup>55</sup> and Herder,<sup>56</sup> Taylor conceptualizes authenticity as being "being true to myself and my own particular way of being"<sup>57</sup> and as a "certain way of being human that is my [sic] way"<sup>58</sup>. Consequently, identity becomes something that one needs to discover through becoming in touch with oneself in his or her own particular way: "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own"<sup>59</sup>. Taylor stresses, however, that identity is not discovered in isolation through simple introspection but comes about in a dialogical manner through interactions with other people: "We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression"<sup>60</sup>. Therefore, identities cannot be recognized a priori – they become recognized

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 32.

through interaction, making recognition something that depends on others and needs to be won<sup>61</sup>.

To once again return to the key point at hand, recognition or misrecognition occurs in two ways: recognizing (or failing to recognize) someone in their universal humanity and thus deserving equal respect and rights and recognizing (or misrecognizing) someone in their particularity as it is constituted by their unique mode of being human – their identity<sup>62</sup>— in the same way as in Honneth’s model of recognition. And what is of prime importance to the current thesis is the vital importance of recognition, and how non-recognition or misrecognition, as failures to fulfil the moral demands for recognition constitute actual harm. As Taylor argues:

“A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”<sup>63</sup>.

In the rest of this chapter and the next ones, I will mostly focus on Honneth’s theory of recognition as the one with the more robust theoretical content. However, considering that both of these authors made a significant contribution to the theory of recognition, as well as taking into account the similarities between them, I consider the mutual effort of both Taylor and Honneth to be at the centre of contemporary theory of recognition in the Hegelian tradition.

#### **1.4 Struggle for Recognition as Correcting Moral Injury**

Considering that recognition is a “vital human need.”<sup>64</sup> and non-recognition or misrecognition “can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred”<sup>65</sup> denial of recognition “is injurious because it impairs [...] persons in their positive understanding of self – an understanding acquired by intersubjective means.”<sup>66</sup> Consequently, it is exactly the faults in recognition that lead to social struggles. Non-recognition and misrecognition cause the recipient at the end of this faulty process of recognition to experience emotional pain such as shame, feeling of disrespect, and anger. For Honneth, the negative emotional response of someone on the receiving end of

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>64</sup> Taylor, C., 1994. “The Politics of Recognition.” In: *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 26.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Honneth, A., (1992) “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition”. *Political Theory*, 20:2, pp. 187-201.

recognition is both the motivational force for social struggles, as well as the criteria by which outside onlookers can potentially judge that a case of non-recognition or misrecognition has taken place. This way recognition, for Honneth, acts both as the motivational force for social struggles as well as the explanatory mechanism for how social progress emerges.

An issue which arises with this conception, when we consider a successful struggle for recognition, is that on what grounds can we say that the conditions for proper recognition of someone have been achieved, i.e., a social injustice has been corrected and the moral injury is no longer going to be inflicted. According to Honneth, this condition would involve someone being evaluated accordingly across the relevant modes of recognitions, and, specifically, their constitutive qualities being evaluated positively within the newly emergent horizon of values. The problem is that, in the receptive model of recognition that Honneth proposes, we are met with a caveat that the model of evaluating something in a positive way presupposes an “objective existence of values.”<sup>67</sup> However, unchangeable objective values conflict with Honneth’s approach to explaining social progress through the struggles or recognition.

Honneth finds a way out of this dead end by “conced[ing] the possibility that these kinds of values represent the certainties of our life-world, whose character can be subject to historical modifications.”<sup>68</sup> The qualities of persons or groups that are perceived “in order to respond to them “correctly” in our recognitional behavior would thus no longer be unchangeable and objective, but historically variable.”<sup>69</sup> However, this approach has the danger of falling into relativism – if the recognitional behavior is based on socialization, it would mean that we can imagine some recognitional acts towards a certain group to only be valid within a single culture. Honneth himself admits this problem that leads him to additionally accept a “robust conception of progress.”<sup>70</sup> Through the chain of historical recognitional practices the “normative level of our relations of recognition rises as well.”<sup>71</sup>

The widening of the sphere of recognition then can be explained with a historical learning process. However, Honneth’s explanation seems to be a bit circular in the sense that the changes in our lifeworld are what allows us to make better recognition judgments, however, this process of change in our lifeworld itself is guided by the demand for recognition that individual persons/groups make.

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<sup>67</sup> Honneth, A. (2004), “Recognition as Ideology,” in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 323–347, p. 331.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p. 332.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 334.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, since the demand and claim for recognition emerge out of the negative feelings following misrecognition, which, in general, includes everything from violent physical attacks to the non-acceptance of someone's way of life, until the person or the group in question does not feel slighted, it begs the question whether their mistreatment can be considered as not fulfilling the moral obligation of recognition. This potential failure of the connection between moral injury – struggle for recognition, has been noted in literature<sup>72</sup>, and we can distinguish two possible scenarios: first, an injury without a proper case of misrecognition and, second, an actual case of misrecognition that does not motivate for a struggle for recognition.

In the next chapter, I will consider in detail how moral injury, as the result of misrecognition (as considered in Honneth's view), may be seen as problematic, given the prerequisites of its development in relation to subject formation. In doing so, I will examine Butler's account of recognition as both a cognitive and a normative process, which is grounded in the available framework of recognizability in its ties to subjection as conditioned by existent relation of power.

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<sup>72</sup> Kauppinen, A. (2002) Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 45:4, 479-498.

## **Chapter II: Judith Butler: Problematizing Recognition – the Link between Recognizability and Subjection**

In the following chapter I will focus on Judith Butler's accounts on the closely intertwined concepts of recognizability, subjection, and a preliminary examination of the desire for recognition to, firstly, supplement Honneth's idea of the struggle for recognition, and, secondly, to provide a critique of the idea of the struggle for recognition as a 'moral grammar of social conflicts.' I intend to problematize Honneth's account of recognition as a receptive (reproductive) and normative process versus an attributive (productive) and cognitive process by turning to Judith Butler's writings on recognition as connected much more closely to subject formation. Key to her argument is the interpretation of recognition as a productive process, which is both normative and cognitive in the sense that we recognize and grant status (normative component) to the persons and groups that we perceive in a certain way (cognitive component).

I will start with presenting Butler's ideas starting from recognizability then moving onto subjection. The following chapter is intended to provide the groundwork for the further argument, in which I suggest that Butler's insights on the intersection of subjection and the desire for recognition (within the possible field of recognizability) present a challenge to an existing view of recognition in Honneth's sense. In doing so, I will follow closely the exchange between Honneth and Butler from the collection of essays *Recognition and Ambivalence* (2021).

### **2.1 The Field of Recognizability**

This distinction between recognition and recognizability in Butler's works was also noted by Axel Honneth, when he wrote about the two types of recognition that he found within Butler's writings: recognition in the cognitive sense and recognition in the normative sense.<sup>73</sup>

In the 2021 exchange with Honneth, Butler states that "my argument is that for the kind of recognition you describe to be possible, recognizability must first be established."<sup>74</sup> For Butler, "recognizability describes those general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place."<sup>75</sup> In Butler's view, we need to take into account this

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<sup>73</sup> Honneth, A. (2021), Recognition Between Power and Normativity: A Hegelian Critique of Judith Butler, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 21-31.

<sup>74</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and Mediation: A Second Reply to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 21-31, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Butler, J. (2006), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. New York: Verso Books, p. 6.

notion of recognizability that makes the three modes of recognition in Honneth's sense possible at all. Before a person can enjoy the three modes of recognition – love, equal respect before the law, and social esteem for her contributions to society, she needs to be apprehended in a certain way that makes her recognizable. Just as recognizability is a necessary precondition for recognition, *intelligibility*, “understood as the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable,”<sup>76</sup> produces the norms of recognizability.

The recognizability in question can also be conceptualized as being initially recognized as human,<sup>77</sup> while recognition in Honneth's normative sense only follows after this initial “framing” has occurred. Hence, if we consider how at a point in time “women and slaves were excluded from the category of the human, and now whole populations are considered lives to be managed by biopolitical means, often targeted in war or abandoned to disease”<sup>78</sup>, which is a blatant example of what can be conceptualized as misrecognition for Honneth. With the notion of recognizability, Butler digs deeper into the background of the reasons why it became possible at all. Here it is also important to note that, recognizability, or rather non-recognizability, is not to be understood in the radical sense of not being seen at all, but not having the possibility for recognition as an equal human being.

The notion of recognizability is not an ethical one, but can be rather considered as epistemic<sup>79</sup>, that shapes what is considered the social norms and the “frames” that one uses to first apprehend the subject in question. The conditions that define recognizability not only structure the way one identifies something as a ‘life’ or a ‘human’, but also “constitute sustaining conditions for those very lives.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, the social norms that are in play in our daily social life function as frames that allow us to apprehend something as recognizable, and thus need to be constantly reproduced.

Of note is the fact that in his exchange with Butler, Honneth raises the question regarding the understanding of recognition as having a cognitive component<sup>81</sup> and their conflation of the notions of recognition and subject formation. Honneth's criticism can be seen as framing the discussion in terms of what comes first: recognition or subject formation,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid p. 6.

<sup>77</sup> Ikäheimo, H. (2022). Recognizability and recognition as human—Learning from Butler and Manne. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 52(4), pp. 579-594., p. 581.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, J. (2021). Recognition and Mediation: A Second Reply to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 21-31, p. 62.

<sup>79</sup> Rae, G. (2022). Judith Butler and the Politics of Epistemic Frames. *Critical Horizons*, 23(2), 172-187. p 172.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, J. (2006), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. Verso Books, p. 24.

<sup>81</sup> Honneth, A. (2021), Recognition Between Power and Normativity: A Hegelian Critique of Judith Butler, in In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 21-31.

with his own receptive model of recognition clearly favoring the later. While Butler can be considered as insisting that recognition and subject formation are mutually dependent and constitutive, yet different processes.<sup>82</sup>

According to this line of thinking, an easy criticism of Butler's position would be to ask how an act can be characterized by intentionality when it lacks an object. In other words, how can recognition (as a reciprocal process in which one struggles to achieve recognition for themselves from the other in a particular way, which in turn also requires recognizing the other in some way) take place when there is not some level of understanding of what is required to be recognized and in which way. In this sense, Honneth's position seems stronger because it is far more intuitive. This, however, would not be completely fair to Butler, because while recognition requires the presence of something to be recognized, what is recognized is dependent on what can potentially be recognized.

To elaborate, subject formation in the sense of acknowledgement of the possession of particular features occurs with reference to the existent framework of recognizability. Although one might possess particular qualities, if they cannot be recognized within an existent framework of social relations, their presence is irrelevant for both subject formation and recognition. As it is, this framework provides the tools for the acknowledgment of them as a person or self. The lifeworld (which is necessarily socially conditioned) thus can be seen in a way as providing the cognitive capacities for recognizing certain features of the self.

To provide an analogy, while everyone has an electromagnetic field, as we are unable to properly detect it with our own senses in ourselves and others, it is irrelevant to how we perceive ourselves and others (while features that we can pick up, such as visual, audio, smell etc., are). Furthermore, we could have been unaware of its existence if not through mediation by external instruments. Going back to our case, the features that we might have, but cannot recognize within the social context in which we are embedded, become irrelevant for the processes of subject formation and recognition. The difference with the electromagnetic field examples is that, unlike our capacity to detect visual images, sound, smell etc, the inability to detect electromagnetic impulses in a meaningful way, rather than being inherent to us (or rather necessitated by our makeup as particular biological species), does not affect our capacity to recognize features relevant for recognition and subject formation that are determined by the lifeworld, which is socially mediated.

To give another example, we can try to imagine a society which is perfectly 'colour-blind', that one's skin pigmentation, despite being detected, is not embedded in any network

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<sup>82</sup> Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

of meaning and has no bearing on the ways in which that person is perceived – it is simply not recognized in a way that is relevant for subject formation. Such a society would be lacking the grammar for recognizing the feature of skin tone, as it is initially absent as a relevant feature of the lifeworld that social relations create.

To bring Honneth and Butler closer together, we can conceptualize these frames of recognizability, or social norms, similarly to Honneth’s “evaluative qualities that we have learned to perceive [in human beings], to the extent to which we are integrated into the second nature of our lifeworld.”<sup>83</sup> It seems that for Butler and Honneth these conceptions carry out the same objective. However, what is missing from Honneth’s account is a thorough approach to the epistemic idea of recognizability because he seems to treat it as irrelevant for his purely normative treatment of recognition<sup>84</sup>. Moreover, the role of recognizability, and the intelligibility that makes it possible for someone to be recognizable, is intertwined with subject formation. So, while Honneth does pay attention that successful recognition happens within a certain historical and social context, he does not problematize this aspect. Butler goes further by pointing out that the conditions for recognizability of certain groups or persons can be either sufficient or insufficient for recognition to be possible at all.<sup>85</sup>

## 2.2 Subjection and Internalization of Oppression

Butler’s insistence on the specific relationship between subject formation and recognition is especially problematic for considering the emancipatory potential of the struggle for recognition as sufficient for the correction of social ills, given Butler’s understanding of the context shaping the conditions of subject formation. As stated previously, for Butler, the discussion on the importance of recognition for individual persons and social life is closely related to the notion of subject formation, or subjection, a notion that comes from Michel Foucault’s writings on power. For Foucault, “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, it can be broadly conceptualized as a complex, pervasive force that operates on different levels within society that shapes individuals, institutions, and discourses. Power has a productive

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<sup>83</sup> Honneth, A. (2002). Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions. *Inquiry*, 45(4), 499–519., p. 513.

<sup>84</sup> Honneth, A. (2021), Intelligibility and Authority in Recognition: A Reply, in In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 55-61.

<sup>85</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and the Social Bond: A Response to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 31-55.

<sup>86</sup> Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 95, 1-160., p. 92.



aspect, it does not only repress, but also produces subjects through shaping individuals through internalized norms and discourses. In the context of the connection between recognizability and subjection, subjection can be understood as something that precedes the very event of recognition and makes the subject in question recognizable in the first place.

The main question for Butler with respect to the connection between the intersection of subjection and power is how “power that at first appears external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assume [...] a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, the subject’s identity itself is formed by power, as Butler conceptualizes it by “power that turns on itself.”<sup>88</sup>

This ambivalent account of recognition problematized by the desire to be recognized can already be seen in Hegel if we look closely at the notion of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In Kojève’s interpretation:

“In order that the human reality come into being as "recognized" reality, both adversaries must remain alive after the fight. Now, this is possible only on the condition that they behave differently in this fight. By irreducible, or better, by unforeseeable or "undeducible" acts of liberty, they must constitute themselves as unequals in and by this very fight. Without being predestined to it in any way, the one must fear the other, must give in to the other, must refuse to risk his life for the satisfaction of his desire for "recognition." He must give up his desire and satisfy the desire of the other: he must "recognize" the other without being "recognized" by him. Now, "to recognize" him thus is "to recognize" him as his Master and to recognize himself and to be recognized as the Master's Slave.”<sup>89</sup>

Considering Butler’s account of recognition further, which is very much influenced by Hegel and by Kojève’s interpretation of him, we might say that prevalent social norms act as a power that comes up as the winner in the struggle for recognition. The individual has no way of escaping it, if they want to be recognized and affirmed in their existence. The subject for Butler is “ec-static” in the sense that it is constructed from the outside rather than within.<sup>90</sup> The mere existence of the self is contingent on the other: “one comes to “exist” by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other”.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, “recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced. This means that to the extent that desire is implicated in social norms, it is bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not.”<sup>92</sup> This is not necessarily a criticism of recognition to point out that recognition is

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<sup>87</sup> Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press., p.3.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid p.6.

<sup>89</sup> Kojève, A. (1980). Introduction to the Reading of Hegel. Ithaca: Cornell University Press., p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>91</sup> Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Abingdon: Routledge., p.5.

<sup>92</sup> Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Abingdon: Routledge Press., p. 2.

always bound with power and ideology and discussion of the desire for recognition is very much present in Honneth's own writings; however, while he describes it as a driving force for the struggle for recognition and a catalyst for social progress, he gives a completely unproblematized account of this desire, which is, even in his writings, intertwined with the account of recognition being an undeniable moral good. In other words, Honneth does not question the desire to be recognized in a particular way. While Butler, in contrast, stresses that the way in which someone seeks to be recognized is shaped by the power relations existent within a given society. Recognition, as the site of the power by which the subject is produced, means that the fulfilment of one's desire for recognition by the other in such a way as to produce a particular subjectivity is already conditioned by power.

Additionally, it is important for a broader understanding of the current argument to point out that, in contrast to the "normative theorists"<sup>93</sup> of recognition such as Honneth, Taylor, or Jürgen Habermas, Butler is working against a background of structuralism, not one of intersubjectivity (despite sharing the basic premises of Hegel's argument for the social context of recognition).<sup>94</sup> Structuralism influenced Butler's focus on the subject as a linguistic being and the preoccupation on the impossibility as well as a redundancy or even harmfulness of complete recognition. If we consider Butler's insights on the ever-changing identity of individuals that is never fully formed, the process of recognition that for Honneth, validates and affirms a person in their positive relation to self, is bound to be unsuccessful at certain points in time. In this thesis, I suggest that the difference in Honneth's and Butler's accounts of recognition, which results from Butler's general view on the relationship between recognition and subject formation (as always occurring in the context of power relations) is key to why, in Butler's account, recognition as a moral act could be considered ambiguous.

Once again, bringing together the previously examined notion of recognizability and its conditions in relation to her understanding of the process of subject formation, recognition, for Butler, can be an ambivalent process. This means that everyone has the desire to be recognized as an intelligible entity, which is necessary for the inclusion into the social order.<sup>95</sup> To be intelligible means being able to fit into the already existing social and political identity categories. While Honneth insists that recognition as the empowering moral act can only be described as evaluating something in a positive way (A has x quality, A is

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<sup>93</sup> Ferrarese, E. (2011). Judith Butler's 'not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 37(7), 759-773., p. 759.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid 760.

<sup>95</sup> Butler, J., 1991, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", *Praxis International*, 11: 150-165.

valid/good/genuine). Butler's account can be understood as positing that the moral act of recognition is not detachable from the epistemic act of recognition (A is x). It can be seen both as the non-recognition of identity categories that have not been put into legal language, as well as the misrecognition of one identity for another which was more available at hand in the present discourse. An example of this difference could be that, for Honneth, the person, in pre-Civil War America, who was able to receive recognition from his master for being a good and dutiful slave, is a case of a successful recognition process.<sup>96</sup> In Honneth's account such recognition also allows the individual in question to achieve some degree of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. Yet, following Butler, we can see that in this example the process of recognizing someone as a 'good slave' is necessitated by the lack of possibility to recognize that person as a fully autonomous human being. As a result, we can see that the case of moral injury caused by improper recognition, in that case, could be limited to not being recognized as not being attributed the positive qualities characterizing one's relevant subject position within a given society (or, to phrase alternatively, network of power relations): being considered a 'lazy slave' rather than a 'dutiful slave'. In this sense, the struggle for recognition, would be of extremely limited scope and, would arguably, not carry much emancipatory potential. Furthermore, what would drive this struggle (as underlying the inflicted moral injury) would be the desire to be recognized in a particular way, which in turn, is mediated by the present and socially available subjectivity.

In conclusion, when considered in the following way, the intersection of subject formation, and the desire for recognition (within the possible field of recognizability) present a challenge to Honneth's existing view of recognition. Developing this point further, in the final chapter, I will problematise Honneth's understanding of the desire for recognition, by examining in greater depth cases when there is no motivational force to constitute a moral injury that is supposed to trigger the struggle for recognition, as well as examples when even the act of moral injury is not enough to inspire such struggle.

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<sup>96</sup> Honneth, A., 2007, "Recognition as Ideology," in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.): Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 323–347., p.326.

### **Chapter III: Relations of Power and the Desire for Recognition**

In order to develop the argument against Honneth's conception of the struggle for recognition being incited by moral injury resulting from mis- or non-recognition as sufficient for social change, it would be necessary to consider in more detail the conditions which limit the emancipatory scope and possible results of this struggle, as well as the reasons why it might not result from moral injury (defined within the framework of Honneth's theory).

In doing so, the chapter will outline why the conditions in which a struggle for recognition is supposed to occur potentially limit what can be defined as the goals of this struggle: the ways in which recognition can be granted and recognition as what specifically. This point is predicated, first, on the assumptions regarding the connection between the existing framework of power and how the subjectivities of those potentially seeking recognition are constituted. Specifically, it is suggested that the identities which are sought to be recognized would:

1) being embedded in the existing social relations, hence, not allow for the desire for the recognition of these identities to be able to significantly challenge the conditions which produce the possibility of non-/misrecognition;

2) might conflict with the understanding of identity, which is seen as being a prerequisite for a moral injury to occur (and consequently incite a struggle for recognition). Furthermore, it would also be possible to question whether gaining recognition for these identities constitutes a correction of the initial moral injury;

Finally, building on this argument, several examples will be provided of how misrecognition or non-recognition would be insufficient to create moral injury, as well as cases where moral injury would not be sufficient to incite the struggle for recognition.

#### **3.1 The Desire for Recognition**

While the desire for recognition is present in both Honneth and Taylor's accounts, when the desire for recognition is considered in connection with the field of recognizability and Butler's account of subjection, the optimistic view of recognition as an emancipatory tool becomes too complicated to uphold.

In her work *Against Recognition*, Lois McNay highlights that for Honneth the "pre-political realm" of social suffering is seen as a realm of unmediated experience characterized by spontaneous and authentic feelings with inherent moral status.<sup>97</sup> What seems to be assumed by Honneth is that "all suffering leads to any kind of political insight or can be

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<sup>97</sup> McNay, L. (2008). *Against recognition*. Cambridge: Polity., p. 138.

accorded such moral significance in the politics of experience.”<sup>98</sup> The suffering that comes after a person receives a moral injury from mis- or non-recognition in Honneth’s account, for example, is the driving force for her to make claims and demand recognition. However, Honneth presents an unproblematic theory of recognition in the sense that it does not account for the ways that a person may seek the kind of recognition that may even be harmful for her.

In the exchange with Honneth, Butler reflects that “the very fact that recognition is reciprocal, or can be, presupposes a structural equality between subjects.”<sup>99</sup> The relationship between individuals, prior to reciprocal recognition can be considered unequal, and this is something Honneth himself would necessarily subscribe to, because, for example, if we consider the goal of recognition of rights to be equal treatment before the law, it presupposes unequal treatment before the person or group in question is properly recognized. In the case of esteem, a group can be not recognized for the contributions they make, but in the process of struggle for recognition, their demand for recognition can be evaluated as valid, and within a certain community, their qualities and contributions will be seen as deserving appreciation – according to the widened value horizon.

We can imagine the best possible situation, where a group that does not enjoy recognition in the areas of rights and esteem, suddenly gain the desired recognition from society at large. We can further imagine that they receive due respect as rights-bearing persons and are considered equal before the law. Other individuals in the bilateral relationship of recognition, on the one hand, expect them to limit their freedom and, on the other hand, limit their freedom in respect of them. The esteem that they gain from recognition corresponds to the qualities that they value of themselves. So far, their struggle for recognition seems to have reached a point of fulfilment. However, if we follow Butler’s insights on recognizability and subjection, we also need to consider the identity of the one being recognized and understand how the issue of recognizability and subjection play into this.

Recognition is possible because “the terms by which we gain social recognition for ourselves are those by which we are regulated and gain social existence.”<sup>100</sup> Butler continues that “to affirm one’s own existence is to capitulate to one’s subordination.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and the Social Bond: A Response to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 31-55, p. 47.

<sup>100</sup> Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 79.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

desire to have an identity that is intelligible within a certain power structure wins over the resistance to that power. To have an identity means to be recognizable as “forms of power [...] establish certain subjects as recognizable as human and others less so, or not at all”.<sup>102</sup> Thus since submitting oneself to power is of utter importance, one’s very existence is contingent on it.

Addressing Honneth in their debate on the ambivalence of recognition, Butler states that “[her] argument is that for the kind of recognition [Honneth] describe[s] to be possible, recognizability must first be established.”<sup>103</sup> While Honneth works within the frame of recognition whereby one achieves individual, legal and social recognition, or at least is partially able to achieve it, depending on the socio-historical context, Butler points out the need to discuss the patterns of inclusion and exclusion of people or groups within the frame of recognition. The kind of recognizability that Butler has in mind is of utter importance, because, for Butler, existing arrangements of power establish subjects as being recognizable as human (or, for that matter, not completely or non-human).<sup>104</sup> According to Butler “[i]dentity categories [like that of women] are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, the imposition of identity categories relies on the fulfilment of a certain set of normative conditions, which are not only prescriptive, but ideological because they reflect structural arrangements and patterns of power existent in society.

### **3.2 Asymmetric Power and the Limits of Recognition**

The relationship between how the character of identities (and therefore the character of the claims for recognition) is limited by existent patterns of power relations can be explicated further by looking once again at why these patterns are so crucial for recognition as a reciprocal process.

The very idea of recognition is dependent on a pre-condition of the intersubjective constitution of subjects. Whether discussed by the supporters of recognition as a condition of freedom and autonomy, or by critics of recognition as an inherently ambivalent phenomenon, the intersubjective constitution of subjects is generally agreed upon as it has its roots in Hegelian recognition. From this premise, we can draw the conclusion that

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<sup>102</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and Mediation: A Second Reply to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 61-69, p. 63.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Butler, J., 1991, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism’”, *Praxis International*, 11: 150–165, p. 160.

subjects are always dependent on each other for recognition – as much as I constitute you, I am dependent on your recognition of myself. In an ideal situation, the kind of vulnerability this situation produces is a symmetrical one; we can imagine that both subjects in the reciprocal relationship of recognition will not risk losing the seemingly fragile equilibrium. However, considering that the discussion on recognition is often connected with recognition of either group or individual identities that we can identify as previously suffering from misrecognition manifested as oppression and structural inequalities, the ideal situation, one of mutual vulnerability, is not present. Thereby, we are faced with a situation that Anthony Simon Laden conceptualizes as one group having more power in constructing the identities of others as “constructive social power.”<sup>106</sup> We can consider that a group has power insofar as “they have the capacity to set out the boundaries, relevance, and status of certain identities”<sup>107</sup> and “determine what characteristics are marked as socially significant, and what the social consequences are for finding yourself with those characteristics.”<sup>108</sup> The problem that arises with this, as already mentioned, is that in order for the claims for recognition of certain identities to be made (and for them to be formed in such a way as to create a tension with the existent framework of social relations) requires a sanction (not to be seen as an act of allowing something to happen executed by agents, but rather as the situation potentially allowing for a ‘disruptive’ possibility to emerge) from those with greater ‘constructive social power’.

Honneth’s response in this case, as discussed in Chapter 2, can be interpreted as being based on 1) his idea of moral progress and 2) the occurrence of moral injury. Recognition as an essential feature of social life in its connection to an expansion of the sphere of just treatment of individuals is saved by the fact, that it is assumed that through gradual progress, individuals will be able to make wider claims for recognition based on the moral injury they suffer.<sup>109</sup> This can be also formulated as such: through the gradual progress norms are being constantly reconstituted in such a way that, first of all, can produce moral injury in groups of people that previously were content with their situation of inequality and oppression<sup>110</sup>, and secondly, the moral injury that has now occurred motivates the group for the struggle

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<sup>106</sup> Laden, A. S. (2004), Reasonable Deliberation, Constructive Power, and the Struggle for Recognition. in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, pp. 270–290, p. 276.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Honneth, A., (1996), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge (MA): MIT University Press., pp. 131-139.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Honneth’s discussion on what recognition could mean for a slave in pre-Civil War US in “Recognition as Ideology,” in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, B. van den Brink, and D. Owen (eds.): Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 323–347.

for recognition. This situation presupposes the possibility of contestation in the case of the misrecognition or nonrecognition that an individual can identify in her mistreatment. In his article on the interplay between recognition and domination, Titus Stahl points out that a similar defense of recognition can also be found in Hegel's own works – the idea of immanent critique within a community, where “individual community members turn critically against their own life-forms and distance themselves from them using the standards of justification provided by those life-forms.”<sup>111</sup> Thus, for both Honneth and Hegel, this constructive social power over others' identities is constrained by the ability to contest the identities (and the ascribed evaluations of those identities) based on the already existing standards of justification.

However, the defense of recognition based on the possibility to contest the forms of justification and the criterion for recognition is problematized by Butler's idea of recognizability. Recognition, for Butler, already happens on the previously established background of what is recognizable in the first place. What the presence of asymmetrical relations of constructive power entails is not only the fact that some groups face inequality and oppression, which in Honneth's view can be contested, but that the framework for recognition and thus the way in which subjectivities are constructed is determined by existing unequal positions of power. The standards of recognizability are precisely the standards of justification on which grounds the 'life-forms' can be challenged. Those who, in the previously mentioned ideal case, seek recognition find themselves in the situation where their identities (in accordance with which they are assumed to be seeking a certain form of recognition) are already constituted with reference to a restrictive framework of power relations – as the ways in which subjects can become intelligible in such a situation is determined by the existing inequalities.

To provide a brief illustration, it is possible to briefly turn to writers specifically concerned with the subjugation and potential for emancipation of various groups, specifically authors engaged in feminist and post-colonial theory.

In her essay *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, Sandra Bartky analyses the construction of femininity in light of Foucault's concept of power as that which embodied in the totality of practices of the self.<sup>112</sup> Following Foucault in his understanding of the nature of the relations of power in contemporary society, she contends

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<sup>111</sup> Stahl, T. (2021), Recognition, Constitutive Domination, and Emancipation, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 161-191, p. 169.

<sup>112</sup> Bartky, S. L. (1998). Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power, In R. Weitz (Eds.), *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 25-45.



that the answer to the rhetorical question of *'Why aren't all women feminists?'* is the internalization of the norms of a patriarchal society: "understanding of women's oppression will require an appreciation of the extent to which not only women's lives but their very subjectivities are structured within an ensemble of systematically duplicitous practices."<sup>113</sup> Internalization as such entails "incorporat[ion] in the structure of the self [...] the modes of perception and of self-perception that allow a self to distinguish itself from other selves and from things that are not selves."<sup>114</sup> Following from this, she suggests that "any political project that aims to dismantle the machinery that turns a female body into a feminine one may as well be apprehended by a woman as something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation" and that "the radical feminist critique of femininity may pose a threat not only to a woman's sense of her own identity and desirability but to the very structure of her social universe."<sup>115</sup>

While it may not be necessary to agree with the particular content of Bartsky's empirical claims presented in the essay, to apply this line of thinking to the current discussion, would be to say that, first, not only women's subjectivities are constructed against the background of the existing relations of power which condition the emergence of social norms and corresponding disciplinary practices, but also that the capacity to recognize themselves and others are determined by the internalization of the existent norms that condition their oppression. What is more important furthermore, is that the struggle that is supposed to relieve the existent conditions of oppressions would be necessarily divorced from the self-understanding that women as subjects existing within the structure of patriarchal relations can be afforded.

Therefore, to take this point further, it may be possible to question the possibility of moral injury occurring as such within a system of strong determination of identification by the existent network of power relations, as: "to become recognizable, one needs to accept certain norms which remain removed from the control of the subject altogether; these norms, by extension, are therefore isolated against critique."<sup>116</sup> As long as influencing these norms remains outside the reach of those who might be seen as potentially becoming engaged in the struggle for proper recognition, the possibility for the right conditions to emerge that would create a situation where such struggle would be possible is not dependent on those who would be engaged in this struggle. This is due to, firstly, tension between how certain

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Stahl, T. (2021), Recognition, Constitutive Domination, and Emancipation, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 161-191, p. 171.

groups or individuals are recognized, and how they might potentially be recognized (the latter requiring the presence of self-understanding which is different from that offered by the existing framework of recognizability). For this process to occur, an expansion of the horizon of values needs to already have occurred. The reasons for why this expansion occurred are dependent on something external to the struggle for recognition.

This view, however, may be seen as over deterministic, as it requires not only a complete internalization of the present norms, but also the complete internal coherence of the framework of recognizability and the totality of the subjects' experience. Nevertheless, it still can be argued that the possibilities for the desire for recognition that would be different from the one afforded by the existing framework of power relations to emerge remains limited. Most importantly, the conditions for such a desire to emerge are not dependent on the subjects who might seek a different form of recognition. In this situation, it is difficult to speak of the significance of moral injury as being the catalyst for the struggle for recognition because the initial possibility of the moral injury to occur in a way that would incite this struggle is also very limited and contingent on external factors, despite the existent situation facilitating mis or non-recognition. Therefore, the struggle for recognition, in this interpretation of Honneth's theory, remains fairly limited in its emancipatory potential.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to challenge the understanding of recognition as a purely normative process, instead highlighting how its cognitive aspect, that which is conditioned by the existent relations of power within society, limits the emancipatory scope of the desire for recognition when viewed as being the result of moral injury inflicted by non- or mis-recognition. In doing so, I have problematized Honneth's receptive model of recognition as that which creates the possibility for a specific kind of moral injury to emerge. According to him, recognition across the three modes – love, esteem and rights occurs when we “react in a correct or appropriate way to the reasons contained in the evaluative qualities that human beings possess in different respects.”<sup>117</sup> Non- or mis-recognition is then the failure to react in such a way as to acknowledge those qualities, which results in a moral injury for the person seeking recognition.

Turning to the works of Judith Butler, I have suggested that recognition is not only receptive of the qualities possessed by the subjects, but is also productive, as subjects are constituted through recognition in accordance with the framework of recognizability – that what can be recognized and how it occurs – as such for recognition to be possible “recognizability must first be established.”<sup>118</sup> Moving further, I have emphasized how recognizability in its relationship with subject formation, and the corresponding desire for recognition are dependent of the existent social realities characterized by asymmetric power. Finally, I argued that the desire for recognition, as conceptualized within the framework of Honneth's theory, first, does not necessarily occur as a result of a particular moral injury, as the conditions for the emergence of this injury are absent; secondly, could be contingent in its formation on other processes; thirdly, may not be targeted at the disposing of the reasons due to which mis- or non-recognition can occur.

Conclusively, it needs to be said that my position is not necessarily a pessimistic one. I contend that emancipation is possible, and that social progress is not limited in its extent to seeking the affordance of recognition, but creating the conditions in which such proper recognition can be won. While “we may well be formed within the terms of power”<sup>119</sup> it does not mean the impossibility of resistance, as “we also help to produce and reproduce those terms, and therein we can find agency, even forms of agency that subvert the terms by

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<sup>117</sup> Honneth, A. (2002) “Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions,” *Inquiry*, 45: 499–519, p. 513.

<sup>118</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and Mediation: A Second Reply to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 21-31, p. 63.

<sup>119</sup> Butler, J. (2021), Recognition and the Social Bond: A Response to Axel Honneth, In H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, & T. Stahl (Eds.), *Recognition and Ambivalence*. Columbia University Press, pp. 31-55, p. 40.

which we are conventionally restrained.”<sup>120</sup> If we return to Honneth’s view on the possibility of forming an evaluative judgment in the process of recognition – that occurring in the background of our lifeworld and the values already existent in it, we may find, as Butler suggests, a more radical emancipatory potential, one that is not contained in one’s desire for recognition, but rather in the understanding that the subjects themselves can reformulate the values, even though this can come into conflict with the desire for recognition.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

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