Thompson, Participatory Parity and Self-Realization
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I am pleased to comment on Simon Thompson's paper, as I agree with much of what he has to say. With Thompson I also see the concept of recognition as providing very fertile ground for a theory of justice. I too would assign a priority to Honneth's more comprehensive account of justice. I also agree that there is a need to surmount some of the dichotomies that characterize the Fraser/Honneth debate, and that doing so can also enrich each position. And I share his interest in surmounting oppositions like the right and the good.

Within the context of this underlying agreement, then, let me raise a few issues that may contribute to further discussion. First, I question Thompson's acceptance of the tripartite differentiations that characterizes Honneth's and Fraser's positions. Second, I raise a couple of questions regarding Thompson's effort to synthesize the two positions. Third, I make some general comments about a topic he broaches at the end of his paper: the relationship of the right and the good.

A central component of Thompson's effort to synthesize the two positions is to detail the degree in which their two conceptions of justice cut across one another. In particular, he shows how Honneth's three-fold distinction between care, respect, and esteem constructively engage Fraser's tripartite distinction of recognition, redistribution, and representation. I find this effort very rich and suggestive. Behind this effort, however, remains Thompson's conviction that the principles and modes of ordering in Honneth's and Fraser's respective accounts are analytically distinct and mutually irreducible. I question whether this is the case. For instance, he notes how claims to individual autonomy typically require attention to availability of socioeconomic resources. Doesn't this call into question Honneth's categorical distinction between the norms of respect and care? Similarly, he suggests how individual autonomy is connected to the political structure of society, including the ability to have a voice contributive to public debate and decision-making. Yet doesn't he thereby call into question the distinction between recognition and representation central to the Fraser account?

Thompson of course does not deny the interpenetration of categories. Indeed, his point is just to demonstrate how "analytically distinct" principles and orderings may still cut across one another institutionally. Yet the evidence he marshals to support this institutional overlapping seems to question the analytic distinctions themselves. For instance, in noting the dependence of individual autonomy and the availability of social resources, he cites Taylor's famous essay, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty?" Yet isn't the point of this essay just to question the viability of the conceptual distinction between negative and positive liberty? Similarly, isn't the point of Habermas' assertion of the internal connection of private and public invoked by Thompson just to question the proposition that the two are mutually irreducible?

Let me now turn to Thompson's effort to synthesize Honneth's and Fraser's conceptions of recognition. Fraser of course understands recognition as directed to conditions of participatory parity and what might generally be called equality, while for Honneth's conception of recognition is "an intersubjective relationship in which one party acknowledges the positive value of the other." With regard to their possible synthesis, Thompson suggests that a proper account of Honneth's conception cannot be sustained without a societal commitment to equality, enabling all members of a society to obtain the recognition needed for processes of self-realization.

I have two questions here. First, is it really the case that equality is not to be understood as a component of Honneth's notion of recognition? At least on its face this claim seems implausible. Central to an intersubjective account of recognition is the notion of reciprocity, and it is hard to construe recognition (and its congnate mutuality) except as a species of the principle of equality. If this indeed is the case, then Honneth's principle of recognition may already include the principle that Thompson finds lacking and so may not need the supplementation he finds in Fraser's approach.

Of course, it is not fully clear that Honneth himself is fully committed to an account of recognition as reciprocal recognition. Sometimes recognition appears to possess only instrumental value for him. Rather than detailing how individual identity is constituted in a reciprocal process of mutual interaction, recognition for him often is just a tool to enable one party to actualize an existing notion of identity. Yet if there is a deficiency here, might it not be remedied by appealing, not to an alternative paradigm of justice, but to the principle of equality at least implicit in the
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norm of recognitive intersubjectivity that undergirds Honneth’s general undertaking? Further mining the principle of recognition would be consistent with the comprehensive aims of Honneth’s project, committed as it is “to unlocking social experiences of injustice as a whole.” It may be consistent as well with Thompson’s own effort to develop a theory of justice based on the principle of recognition.

Second, I find surprising Thompson’s general effort to present participatory parity as a “necessary condition” for Honneth’s notion of recognition as self-realization. This seems to assign a priority to Fraser’s position, when in fact his stated aim is to emphasize the more fundamental nature of Honneth’s approach. To be sure, rather than seeking to prioritize approaches, Thompson sometimes presents them as existing in a relationship of complementarity. I leave aside the question of whether he can do so consistently. Here I’d simply say that we need to know a little more about how they are complementary. If participatory parity is a necessary condition for self-realization, wouldn’t we also have to say that individual self-realization is somehow a necessary condition for participatory parity? One could perhaps do something like this with an account of civic virtue, or perhaps a Foucauldian notion of self-care, but it would be instructive to know if Thompson even wishes to go in this direction.

This issue bears on the important topic of the relationship of the right and the good. Thompson claims that his proposed synthesis offers “a middle way between the right and the good, the moral and the ethical, the deontological and the sectarian.” I think this is a highly desirable objective, and Thompson’s efforts can contribute to its realization. However, it is not clear to me how a middle way is provided in what he has offered so far. On the contrary, in assigning what seems to be a primacy to participatory parity, and in claiming the aim of such parity is needed to allow everyone to realize themselves according to their own lights, his approach does not seem markedly different from standard deontological approaches to justice, those of course favored by Fraser.

Let me conclude with a couple of comments regarding the relationship of the right and the good. First, the general assumption is that the two theorists present opposed paradigms of justice, with Fraser identified with the deontological approach and its prioritizing of the principle of right, while Honneth affirming a teleological approach committed to self-realization and the general realization of what is good or desirable. As far as I can tell, Thompson accepts this breakdown, even as he seeks to synthesize the two approaches. Yet in my view this breakdown does not do justice to the complexity of either Honneth’s or Fraser’s approach. With regard to Honneth, it does seem questionable to claim, as of course Fraser does, that he sacrifices deontological considerations for those of teleological self-realization. While it is true that a recognition-theoretic approach to social theory does attend to conditions for identity formation, it does not thereby embrace an exclusively teleological approach to normative questions. Instead, there is a decidedly deontological dimension to Honneth’s account as well. Not only is self-realization measured on the basis of general norms relevant to types of successful self-realization—love, respect, and esteem; those recognition types are themselves scrutinized with regard to their general capacity to contribute to social inclusion and individualization. It may be true that Honneth claims that these norms are themselves the product of what is deemed culturally desirable—they have emerged historically as the principles underwriting modern society. Within modern societies, however, they do have a deontological or, to use Honneth’s Habermasian language, quasi-transcendental status, one that, independently of what is deemed desirable, can be understood to govern general conditions for ego development and social interaction.

As for Fraser’s position, one can question whether her own juxtaposition of deontological and teleological considerations is itself sustainable, a question also raised by Honneth as well. One can question, for instance, whether (a) the concept of radical democracy central to her deontological notion of participatory parity, (b) her conception of deliberative proceduralism, and (c) in general her commitment to “the liberal norm of equal autonomy and moral worth of human beings” might not themselves depend upon and/or affirm a particular conception of the good. In addition, her determination to justify participatory parity as a product of historical development would itself seem, inter alia, to suggest that she links the validity of norms associated with notions of what is culturally desirable.

From my perspective, then, the question is not to surmount an opposition between Fraser and Honneth on their respective views of the relationship of the right and good. Given that in different ways they both depend upon and reaffirm the opposition between deontological and teleological forms of normative analysis, it is questionable how fruitful such an effort can be. For me, the task is to develop a new theory of justice that surmounts the unmediated and, to use a seemingly outdated category, “undialectical” account of their relationship present in both Honneth’s and Fraser’s theories. And for this, what is needed in my view is not a synthesis of Fraser and Honneth, but an account of justice as recognition that focuses on a norm already invoked, that of reciprocal recognition. The rudiments of this position have already been formulated by Hegel, the original recognition theorist. In what remains let me make a few comments pertaining to such a position.

On the one hand, Hegel claims that an account of individual self-realization entails and presupposes a deontological notion of justice. On his intersubjective account of identity formation, individuals develop a proper sense of self-identity only in obtaining the recognition of another. Such recognition is itself
meaningful, however, only if freely given, and not coerced. It can be freely given only if the other is recognized as free and autonomous by the self originally seeking recognition. "[T]rue freedom consists in my identity with the others; I am only truly free when the other is free and is recognized by me as free."5 On this view one can oneself be a person only by affirming the autonomy and dignity of the other as a person, and not just as a means to one's own ends. An individual obtains a "sense of self only by regarding the other as other."6 Such other-regarding respect, however, is a basic principle of deontological ethics; Hegel calls it the "commandment of right" ("be a person and respect others as persons")7. To appreciate this point, however, is only to acknowledge Hegel's view of the connection between teleological and deontological approaches to normativity. While a theory of recognition may focus initially on conditions for individual identity formation, identity formation itself requires affirmation of general principles of human dignity and respect. One can be a person oneself only if one respects others as persons. For Hegel an ethic of self-realization both requires and entails a deontological conception of normativity.

Just as Hegel asserts that a teleological ethic depends on deontological considerations, so he presents deontological considerations as dependent on the teleological—a point reflected as well in his conception of right. As a general command, right is a deontological principle claiming universal status and applicability; it has "validity in and for itself."8 Yet a universal principle, for Hegel, is not one that can be asserted abstractly, juxtaposed to the conditions of ethical experience. Central to its legitimacy and thus its binding quality as a moral norm is its capacity to find concrete embodiment in the practices of individuals and societies. In this respect Hegel claims first that principles of right must find expression in an existing and enforceable system of laws. But he maintains as well that it must find expression in a general cultural consciousness of right, one itself required for the viability of a legal system.9 A collective consciousness of right specific to a particular community is forged through processes of intersubjective exchange, where individuals coalesce around shared norms, values and practices that serve to interpret and reinterpret general principles of right. Such processes of intersubjective exchange, however, are practices of reciprocal recognition, which themselves are rooted in processes of individual identity formation. In this way, assertion of general norms of justice, for Hegel, goes hand in hand with processes of individual self-realization. Just as he maintains that a teleological account of normativity depends on deontological considerations, so a deontological account depends on the teleological. From an Hegelian perspective, notions of the right and the good are biconditional and mutually implicative.

In short, a conception of justice can be formulated that does surmount the opposition between deontological and teleological notions of justice arguably present in the work of Honneth and Fraser alike. Moreover, such reconciliation is achievable by utilizing the tools of a logic of recognition; indeed, recognition understood as a principle of reciprocal recognition expresses and embodies this reconciliation. Since Thompson seeks to locate a middle ground between the right and the good in the context of a developed account of recognition, these considerations can perhaps contribute to further developing his interesting and important project.

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Endnotes

2. Redistribution or Recognition? 259ff.
8. Hegel, §333.
9. Hegel, §484.