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Perception, Recognition, and the Aesthetics of Exclusion. A Paradox in Axel Honneth's Social Theory

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Abstract
Among contentious issues in Axel Honneth's social theory is the status of primary recognition. Intended as a foundation for more substantial forms of recognition of love, respect, and esteem, primary recognition was criticised as capable of accounting for inclusionary attitudes only, and for its inability to account for human negativity. This paper is a critical analysis of the principal claim of Honneth's epistemology of recognition which asserts an intrinsic relationship between perception and primary recognition. I argue that Honneth's conception of primary recognition, based on mutually inconsistent claims concerning the relationships between perception and recognition, leads to a serious paradox. I claim that while primary recognition is conceptually and methodologically necessary to explain recognitive attitudes which are at the centre of his theory, it is also a precondition of exclusionary attitudes. I contend that the paradox in Honneth's theory may be avoided with the help of the concept of the regime of perception. The idea of the perceptual regime is outlined through reference to the philosophical critique of perception and its functioning is illustrated by the example of antisemitism as a radically exclusivist ideology and practice.

Keywords Perception · Primary recognition · Exclusion · Paradox of recognition · Regime of perception

1 Introduction

The theory of recognition, developed by Axel Honneth in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) and subsequent works, has become one of the leading paradigms in contemporary social theory. As with every important theory of that range, it provoked numerous criticisms. Among controversial issues in his theory is the status

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of primary recognition understood as a precondition of higher forms of recognition that are to find expression in love, respect, and esteem. Honneth discusses primary recognition through examination of the rôle of perception in recognition, a subject that he puts under the umbrella of the epistemology of recognition (Honneth, 2001). Though he refers to perception throughout his work, especially in the context of the primary relationship between infants and caregivers, as well as in the discussion of G. H. Mead's conception of socialization and D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalysis, his views concerning the perceptual aspect of recognition remain ambiguous. On the one hand, he claimed that cognitive attitudes are decisively different from recognitive ones and that cognition precedes recognition: recognition, *Anerkennung*, is to follow cognition, *Erkennung* (Honneth, 2001, p. 116). On the other, he argued on behalf of a reverse claim that recognition is prior to cognition, or, rather, he adopted a view which conflated recognition and perception. At the same time, the distinction between perception and recognition continues to function in his arguments, especially in his essay on reification (Honneth, 2008). As a result, the rôle played by the perception in recognitive relationships remains unclear.

In this paper, I aim to show that his attempt at clarification of the relationship between cognition and recognition leads him to abandon his initial distinction between *Erkennen* and *Anerkennen*. However, this reversal implies a repudiation of his assumption of the privacy of cognition and the publicness of recognition. Moreover, giving up on this distinction leads him not only to conflate recognition with cognition but also opens his position to a more serious challenge, namely why elementary recognition has to signify sympathetic recognition (Jay, 2008, p. 11). No less importantly, it is unclear how his theory is to account for the negative exclusionary attitudes. I claim that the most serious problem of his approach stems from the fact that he confined his attention to the problem of social invisibility, whereas a much more serious challenge to his theory is posed by the situations in which some people are perfectly perceptible and socially visible, and are thus recognized in the primary sense, yet the primary recognition is extended to them not as an initial step towards recognizing them further in the sense of respect, love, and esteem, but deliberately to refuse to them those more substantial forms of recognition. No less serious problems arise in relation to Honneth's claim that cognition is private while recognition is public.

In this paper I attempt both to highlight and clarify some of the ambiguities in Honneth's approach. I argue that recognitive relationships are being informed by socially constructed regimes of perception, or perceptual regimes, which necessarily involve discernment, discrimination, and exclusion. I support Honneth's position in so far as he claims that the primary recognition extended to others is conceptually and methodologically necessary in order to be able to explain the inclusive attitudes upon which he focuses his attention. However, I argue that antecedent recognition is also a precondition of exclusionary attitudes. The elementary recognition thus forms a psychological ground upon which both the attitudes of exclusion and inclusion may develop, depending on the normative regime of perception to which a given person has been subjected and which informs her perceptual abilities.

Honneth's article "Invisibility. On the Epistemology of 'Recognition'" (2001) contains the fullest account of his view of the issue. The paper deserves close

attention for two reasons. First, it deals with a problem of primary recognition which is of paramount importance for understanding social relations, and second, it documents a crucial change in Honneth's views concerning the relationship between cognition and recognition. In so far as the latter is concerned, I demonstrate how, in the course of the argument, Honneth's views evolve from the claim of priority of *Erkennen* over *Anerkennen* to the reverse one, a position he developed further in subsequent papers, especially in *Reification* (2008). Since this reversal is particularly significant for the concept of primary recognition, and thus for the theory of recognition in general, Honneth's reasoning is reconstructed below in some detail in Part One.

In Part Two, I outline the concept of the regime of perception as a conceptual structure supervenient upon natural perceptual abilities which imposes a specific order on the stream of sensations, thus enabling one to perceive things in a specifically organised way. The concept helps to do away with Honneth's distinction between private cognition and public recognition. Through reference to selected examples of perceptual regimes, especially antisemitism, I argue, against Honneth, that the concept of social visibility is a precondition not only of inclusive moral attitudes but also of exclusive ones. The significance of the above issues far exceeds the problems of the epistemology of recognition as it is directly related to the question of whether the primary mutual hostility between human individuals makes them irreparably unsociable or even antisociable by nature, as Freud believed, or they are sociable by nature and can be socialized "all the way down" (Whitebook, 2001). In this paper, however, I confine myself to the analysis of the role of perception in recognition, addressing those larger questions only in the conclusion. (Throughout the paper the "primary recognition" is referred to also as "elementary" or "antecedent" one.)

2 Part One

2.1 Insignificant Others

In his discussion of perception in recognition Honneth distinguishes between two concepts of invisibility, physical and social. The latter is illustrated by three examples. The first, drawn from Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*, refers to its protagonist, a black man, who is exposed to a peculiar form of racism in the form of a complete disregard for him, to the point of making him feel invisible. Though he acknowledges that invisibility has some advantages, it is so acute that it undermines his sense of existence. To become noticeable and thus convince himself of his own existence, he swears at people, curses them, and strikes at them (Ellison, 1947, p. 5).

The second example, analysed in greater detail below, refers to the noble people who demonstrated their superiority towards members of dominated classes by "not perceiving" them. Their particular social blindness permitted them to undress in the presence of their servants.

Thirdly, social invisibility is illustrated by the behaviour of some people towards others as if they were not there, like pretending not to see, or looking through, an

antagonized acquaintance, a cleaning person, or a person with black skin. A person who pretends not to see someone familiar demonstrates an intentional disregard for her. There is nothing wrong with the eyesight of a person affecting such social blindness. The true purpose of pretending not to see others is to convey to them that they, though not immaterial, do not matter to them. It is thus about letting them know that they do not count anymore as significant others: they have become insignificant. By disregarding, ignoring, overlooking, and discounting them, one is making them aware that they have become insignificant for a given person which is precisely the point of this kind of affected social blindness.

On the basis of these examples, Honneth introduces a distinction between perceivability and visibility. Perceivability of a person means that she is physically noticeable, while visibility in the social sense implies a possibility of identification of a perceived person through ascription to her some specific features, e.g. being a woman, a person of black skin, etc. Physical invisibility means only that an object "is not present […] in a person's perceptual field, [while] physical visibility requires that we cognize it within a spatio-temporal framework as an object with situationally relevant properties" (Honneth, 2001, p. 113).

2.2 Social Visibility and its Outward Criteria

Visibility in the social sense, as distinct from physical one, means being able to evoke visible reactions from others which would confirm one's physical visibility or perceivability. Such reactions may be expressed by means of appropriate words, gestures, or facial expressions. Accordingly, since social invisibility presupposes visibility in the physical sense (Honneth, 2001, p. 114), there is a connection between seeing a person and public manifestations of seeing her: the feeling of being invisible in the social sense implies a feeling of being ignored, disregarded and thus humiliated. This enables Honneth to distinguish *Erkennen* from *Anerkennen*: "While by cognizing a person we mean an identification of him as an individual that can gradually be improved upon, by 'recognizing' we refer to the expressive act through which this cognition is conferred with the positive meaning of an affirmation" (Honneth, 2001, p. 115). Cognition is thus a private or non-public act while recognizing is dependent on the media through which the recognizing person demonstrates her appreciation of the social "validity" of the person recognized.

Following Daniel Stern's research concerning the relationship between a mother and her child Honneth claims that during the first year of a child's development, the regulation of emotions and attention is performed through a repertoire of gestures and facial expressions which enable the mother to interact with her child. The child responds by reflex-like activities, like a smile, which convey essential information to its mother. Such automatically practised exchange helps to transform, gradually, through encouragement, the initial reflexes into the first forms of a social response (Honneth, 2001, p. 117). The parental relationship with the child cannot go first through an act of cognition of a needy child, and only afterwards be followed by the mother acting in a way which expresses her affirmative attitude towards it. It is

rather the case that a mother perceiving her child immediately reacts with an affirmative attitude toward it (Honneth, 2001, p. 118).

The considerations of the mother–child relationship are then extrapolated on the relationships between adults (Honneth, 2001, p. 116; 125). The importance of smiles, other facial expressions, and gestures becomes evident if one considers situations in which they are not performed: their absence is an indication of social pathology. Accordingly, "every form of social recognition of a person depends on symbolical relations to the expressive gestures in direct communication which ensure their social visibility" (Honneth, 2001, p. 118). The dependency of recognition on expressive gestures means that only such bodily gestures are capable of articulating publicly the affirmation and that the addition of those gestures constitutes the difference between cognizing and recognizing. Only those who see themselves as having been positively cognized "in the mirror of the expressive behavioural modes of their counterparts know themselves to be socially recognized in an elementary form" (Honneth, 2001, 120). Such expressive gestures are symbolic actions or "meta-actions": they symbolically signal a type of behaviour that the addressee may legitimately expect.

Following the above, Honneth defines the concept of elementary recognition as "an expressive gesture of affirmation […]: by making a gesture of recognition towards another person, we performatively make her aware that we see ourselves obligated to behave towards her in a certain kind of benevolent way" (Honneth, 2001, p. 120). Elementary recognition in this sense is intrinsically coupled with socially fashioned ceremonies of acknowledgement which serve to express positive affirmation of the existence of someone and of her worth. In other words, the inner process of recognising someone is expressed by gestures conforming to socially established outward criteria (Wittgenstein, 1953, §580).

Conferring social validity to someone constitutes the moral aspect of recognition. Being bestowed with the expression of respect imposes upon the respected person an obligation to forgo all his egocentric actions (Honneth, 2001, p. 121; Kant, 2011 (1786), BA 401). By being recognized, a subject undergoes a decentring because the respect conceded to him by another subject imposes upon him a worth which is a source of legitimate claims infringing upon his self-love which in turn is tantamount to the imposition of moral obligations upon him by the recognizing subject. Honneth believes that this characterization captures the moral core of all direct forms of recognition. By recognizing someone and conferring on him a moral authority over one in this sense, one [is] at the same time already motivated to treat him in the future according to his worth" (Honneth, 2001, p. 122). Honneth believes that this characterization captures the shared moral core of all direct forms of recognition (Honneth, 2001, p. 122).

Yet the rôle of outward gestures cannot be reduced to an additional reinforcement of the act of recognition. Such gestures signal something far beyond the assertion or approval of someone's features or characteristics. They are manifestations of the readiness to limit oneself to benevolent actions in relation to another. This motivational readiness is a result of the assessment of worth which is accorded to the intelligibility of human beings (Honneth, 2001, p. 123). By making such gestures, the recognizing subject has already restricted his egocentric perspective to include in it

another intelligible person through according worth to her. This points to the conclusion that morality coincides with outwardly perceptible ceremonies expressive of recognition. If, however, one considers the very act of cognition of a person inseparable from the attribution of worth to him, the distinction between cognition and recognition becomes blurred. As much is acknowledged by Honneth: should this be the case, "then even the opposition between cognizing and recognizing, which up to now has supplied thread for my argument, would have to be revised" (Honneth, 2001, p. 124).

Honneth claims that a smile shown by a caregiver to the child does not follow from some prior deliberations but is a direct expression of the perception of the child. Subsequent consideration of the caregiver's reactions to the needy child leads him to undermine his own distinction between cognition and recognition even further. Such reactions as a smile are either a natural endowment of human beings or they are learned in the course of social upbringing. In both cases, the distinction between perception and recognition becomes difficult to sustain because the very perception of a person becomes concurrent and even identical with the attribution of worth to her, irrespective of whether it is a natural or socially conditioned ability. Honneth concludes that human perception is not normatively neutral and that this "necessitates a revision of the distinction between cognition and recognition because it is now apparent that cognition does convey an expression of worth accorded to others" (Honneth, 2001, p. 125).

This conclusion is extrapolated onto the "whole social world in its entirety": the "evaluative perception" characterizes in equal measure the interaction between adults. For if the representation of worth is interpreted as an act of an evaluative perception that every socialized human being is capable of, then this has "far-reaching consequences for the relationship between cognizing and recognizing" (Honneth, 2001, p. 126). For it is now impossible to distinguish the act of cognizing the other from an act of recognizing her, defined as a public manifestation of according worth to the other through which an individual concedes a moral value to another. Since both acts imply the same idea of decentring of the subjects involved, Honneth argues that "the merely cognitive identification of a human being seems to lose its apparent natural priority over recognition" (Honneth, 2001, p. 126). It now appears that recognition precedes cognition rather than the other way round: "we usually become aware of the 'worthy' properties of the intelligible person first of all, so that the merely cognitive identification of a human being represents the exceptional case in which an original recognizing is neutralized." (Honneth, 2001, p. 126). In this way, he renounces his own initial distinction between cognition and recognition: *Erkennung* turns out to be tantamount to *Anerkennung*.

This conclusion drew many criticisms. Honneth's considerations on the child-caregiver relationship were criticized as based on an "overly optimistic anthropology" (Allen, 2021, p. 100) and on a belief in "Arcadian myth of presocial innocence" (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 203). In his sweeping critique of "Habermasians," Joel Whitebook forcefully argues that Honneth's appreciation of the Hobbesian element in Hegel's Jena writings doesn't go far enough, thus leading to downplaying the work of negativity (Whitebook, 2001, p. 262). Judith Butler observed that for Honneth, "negativity is conceptually separated from recognition" (Butler, 2021, p. 50).

In his protestations, Honneth claimed that the mother–child relationship "is not intended to contain any norms of positive concern or respect. Nor does it claim that certain positive, benevolent feelings are at work" (Honneth, 2008, p. 151). He also asserts that "[l]ove and hate, ambivalence and coldness, can all be expressions of this elementary recognition as long as they can be seen to be modes of existential affectedness" (Honneth, 2008, p. 152). Nevertheless, the impression of the all-encompassing inclusiveness of the thus-understood elementary relationship was not dispelled. For, as he writes, "The act of placing oneself in the perspective of a second person requires an antecedent form of recognition that cannot be grasped in purely cognitive or epistemic concepts, as it always and necessarily contains an element of involuntary openness, devotedness, or love" (Honneth, 2008, p. 45).

Below, I present a line of reasoning aimed to support Honneth's view of the link between cognition and recognition. The argument is built around Honneth's illustration of nobility revealing their nakedness in the presence of their servants, and related ones. Against Honneth, however, I argue that elementary recognition is not only a prerequisite of the inclusionary moral attitudes, as Honneth claimed, but also of the exclusionary ones, which suggests that the link between cognition and primary recognition holds but it does not necessarily lead to more substantial forms of recognition. In Part Two, I claim that ambiguity in Honneth's primary recognition is due to his indecision concerning the foundation of human perceptual abilities, and I propose to tackle the issue with the help of the concept of perceptual regime.

2.3 The Invisible Others

Honneth mentioned the example of nobility undressing in front of their servants as an illustration of social invisibility. I claim that the example is ill-chosen. Honneth suggests that the noble classes were unembarrassed by undressing in the presence of their servants, just as, one may presume, they were unembarrassed doing so in the presence of their furniture. By so doing, the nobility expressed disregard and disrespect toward the servants' humanity. It was thus morally wrong because by thus acting, the nobility reduced their servants to the status of things. By behaving in this way, the nobility acted toward their servants as they would toward "lifeless objects – without a trace of inner sentiment or any attempt at understanding the other's point of view" (Honneth, 2008, p. 18). Such behaviour is morally unacceptable because the servants, though physically visible, were made in this way invisible socially.

In response, it should be remarked that, on the one hand, exposure to other people's nakedness excites a great number of intense emotions which are an important part of human personhood: amusement, discomfiture, shame, embarrassment, disgust, or revulsion, but also aesthetic pleasure, sexual excitement, arousal, or desire. By exposing servants to views that normally stir such a variety of emotions, the behaviour in question objectified or reified them by disregarding an important part of their personhood. In this sense undressing in front of them regardless of their feelings dehumanized them because it demonstrated a lack of affectedness towards them. On the other hand, if shame related to revealing one's body to others' view occurs when „we are concerned about who have seen us and what they have seen,

about what they think, about how the word has spread," and „If we become convinced that nobody – or at least nobody whom we deem important – has actually watched our naked appearance, our shame anxiety or shame evaporates" (Westerlund, 2023, p. 2215), then indeed the exposition of the noble nakedness to servants deemed the latter socially unimportant. One is thus justified in supposing that the nobility believed that their body could be exposed to the view of their servants without a sense of shame precisely because they treated the servants like furniture, or chattels. Their servants' viewing of their naked bodies did not matter to them because the servants did not matter to them morally.

Such a reading of the behaviour in question needs to be qualified. First, the surface of human skin is a political battleground between advocates of decency and champions of liberty. The intensity of those controversies testifies to the importance of the rules regulating permissible and impermissible ways of revealing one's nakedness, the historical transformations of these rules, their cultural diversity, and their (non)applicability in particular situations. Many factors determine the rules which regulate the expanse of skin and the particulars of human anatomy to be covered, as well as those that can be revealed without provoking public indignation as acts of shamelessness, exhibitionism, violations of the rules of decency or obscenity laws. Moreover, no less importantly, the persistence and repressiveness of those rules suggest not only a strong resistance against revealing the human body to the view of others but also testify to persistent human exhibitionist and voyeuristic inclinations. Finally, human skin is also a territory of expansion of the capital which finds ways to benefit from repressive and liberal policies alike.

Second, disrespect involved in Honneth's example should not be seen as an expression of an individual, private intention. The intention was rather inscribed in social rules in force in the hierarchical class society. The servants were objectified primarily not by their masters but by the social system of which both sides of this unequal relationship were a part. The very idea of custom suggests that such behaviour was not dictated by an individual "noble" intent to demonstrate disregard toward a servant, although they might have been objectified secondarily and additionally by individual idiosyncrasies, like the paraphilic disorder of exhibitionism or attention deficit, as such motives could have played a rôle in individual cases. Honneth is aware of this problem; in another context, he wrote that such behaviour „can be conceived neither as a kind of moral misconduct nor as a violation of moral principles, for it lacks the element of subjective intent necessary to bring moral terminology into play" (Honneth, 2008, p. 25–26). Indeed, it would be quite uncommon for a noble person to demonstrate her intention to denigrate a servant in this particular manner. Naturally, the social status of the servant or a slave as a chattel allows for such a possibility; indeed, one can additionally denigrate someone already denigrated by the ascription to a debasing place on the social ladder. But there is an important difference: while a degraded servant may be additionally humiliated, a piece of furniture may not. This becomes obvious when one considers a situation in which such a noble person would intentionally attempt to humiliate a servant; it would be tantamount to recognizing the servant as a person that *could* be humiliated. In this way, some worth would be attributed to the servant, i.e. she would be positively recognized as a person, even if only for the purpose of her denigration.

Another example of social invisibility may be found in Peter Driscoll's novel *Heritage*, set in French Algeria. Mustafa, an Arabic servant in a household of a rich and powerful family of French colonizers, witnessed an important conversation between his masters. What he heard spurs him to action which has ominous consequences for the family. Those consequences would not have occurred had Mustafa been recognized as capable of understanding what is said and able to draw appropriate conclusions. If he were so perceived, he might have been asked to leave the room or, if his personhood were fully recognized by his masters, he might have been invited to join the conversation as an equal partner. Instead, while his presence was assumed and acknowledged as obvious, important parts of his human agency were disregarded by his masters as immaterial. "He might or might not have been listening. Nobody ever wondered. He was a part of household scenery, as unobtrusive as a piece of furniture" (Driscoll, 1982, p. 503). He was recognized, but only as a servant. Such forms of recognition are tantamount to perceiving others in a way that disregards or denies them some important human features. In other words, Honneth would say he was socially invisible. Undoubtedly, however, such reifying, instrumentalising, and denigrating forms of (mis)recognition do involve primary recognition: without primary recognition of the thus misrecognized or reified persons their reification and instrumentalization would not be possible. It is precisely such circumstances that Frantz Fanon had in mind when he wrote:

> One day the White Master, without conflict, recognized the Negro slave. But the former slave wants to make *himself* recognized. At the foundation of Hegelian dialectic there is an absolute reciprocity which must be emphasized. It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, if I prevent the accomplishment of movement in two directions, I keep the other within himself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself (Fanon, 1986, p. 217; emphasis added).

The analysis of Honneth's example supports his claim about the intrinsic relationship between perception and recognition. It demonstrates that human beings must constantly deal with other human beings in an engaged and interested manner (Honneth, 2008, p. 34), even if they sometimes do so only in a morally questionable sense of the interestedness. However, it demonstrates that the behaviour of noble people revealing their nakedness or otherwise disregarding the human abilities of their servants cannot be interpreted as illustrative of complete social invisibility as it evidently involves primary recognition in Honneth's sense. After all, servants were there for the nobility to provide them with all sorts of services. Their ability to master the art of providing such services, and being seen as capable of it, makes them importantly different from mere chattels; the chattels furnishing nobility's rooms would not be able to provide the required services. This means that even if servants were reified or objectified by existing customs, they were not reified completely: *some* worth was attributed to them and their humanity *was* recognized, even if only partly. Moreover, the very fact that the servants might have been intentionally humiliated, chastened, or used as sexual objects, as they in fact were, demonstrates that their humanity was recognized by their masters; to repeat, one cannot humiliate or reify a lifeless object.

3 Part Two

3.1 Social Visibility and the Aesthetics of Exclusion

Along with his critics, I believe that Honneth's discussion of elementary recognition is inadequate. Confining attention to social invisibility does not help to address properly the problem of the epistemology of recognition and serves to obscure the relationship between perception, social visibility, and social exclusion. Honneth's most significant error lies in overlooking more serious forms of social denigration which do involve primary recognition in his sense. Below I discuss an example illustrating that the elementary perception does not lead only to more substantial forms of recognition but becomes a ground for the deliberate denial of them.

In her critique of Honneth's conception of reification and instrumentality, Judith Butler queries his claim that an observational, disengaged attitude is a definitive feature of reification, and argues that an emotionally charged attitude towards the other cannot be equated with affirmative recognition only. Accepting such a view would make it impossible to explain human aggression (Butler, 2008, p. 103). "To say that we affirm the existence of the other whom we maim, and that our very affective involvement testifies to this affirmation, is surely a way of ruling out the possibility of extreme aggression that is as equally primordial, social, and human, as modes of recognition and respectful care" (Butler, 2008, p. 104).

Butler underlined her point by referring to Nazi activities during Second World War, professing her uncertainty as to the extent to which the problem of the Holocaust forms a background for Honneth's continuing interest in instrumentality (Butler, 2008, p. 105). Her uncertainty is justified because the problem of National Socialism and the Holocaust provoked surprisingly few references in Honneth's *oeuvre* and was not dealt with by him in a systematic way. Some remarks on the subject may be found in his conversation with Simon Critchley (1998, p. 27–28). In another interview, he claims that the problem of whether the Holocaust is to be understood as a rupture within a developed civilisation, or as a form of intensification of what was then achieved in liberalism, and that it has not been resolved perhaps because "it continues to be a very difficult challenge for any thinking after Auschwitz to understand National Socialism together with the Holocaust causally" (Köhler, 2013). In order to point to an important lacuna in Honneth's concept of primary recognition, I would like to refer to the Nazi construction of Jews as *die inneren Feinde des deutschen Volkes* as the most poignant illustration of the power of perceptual regimes – a concept to be elaborated below.

Before the Nazi takeover in 1933, the number of Jews living in Germany amounted to about three-quarters of one per cent of the whole German population which at that time exceeded 67 million. The German Jews were thus a tiny minority, most of them thoroughly assimilated; they did not stand out from German society as a distinct ethnic community. What made them recognizable as Jews,

thus socially visible in a negative way, was precisely the ideology and propaganda of the Nazi regime. The regime worked out an elaborate and sophisticated way to make them visible both physically and socially, meticulously specifying the details of their recognizable and distinguishable outward features. The Jews were not made invisible, physically or socially, by the regime; on the contrary. Making them all-too-perceivable and thus recognizable in a negative way was the precondition of their elimination. This was achieved by means of an elaborate, detailed and institutionalised perceptual regime which served the purpose of the detection of Jews among the German and European societies. The Nazi perceptual regime served to identify Jewishness even in people who, like Primo Levi and Jean Améry, learned about their being Jewish only when the racist *Nürnberger Gesetze* were implemented in Italy and Austria. Thanks to the Nazi perceptual regime; the Jews could have been actively recognized as Jews, and only then they were vigorously "disappeared." Some Jews managed to survive the Holocaust by making themselves physically and socially invisible by hiding or blending into hostile European societies. The workings of the regime may be illustrated by an exchange of stares between Primo Levi and one of his oppressors in Auschwitz:

> He raised his eyes and looked at me. […] That look was not one between two men; and if I had known how completely to explain the nature of that look, which came as if across the glass window of an aquarium between two beings who live in different worlds, I would also have explained the essence of the great insanity of the third Germany (Levi, 1959, p. 122–123).

The undeniable primary recognition thus extended to the Jews and other "non-Aryans", i.e. the Slavs, the Romani, and the Black people, effected by the exclusionary Nazi perceptual regime, was not intended as a preliminary to the higher levels of recognition of love, solidarity, and esteem; much to the contrary.

Though perceptual regimes organize people's perceptions, they as a rule remain invisible to them until they clash with alternative ones. This point may be appreciated by reflecting on how the perceptual regime that undergirded the Holocaust clashed with another one that was at work in the turbulent response of Jewish communities to Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. Their passionate condemnation of Arendt was aimed against her alleged downplaying of Adolf Eichmann's rôle in the Holocaust. Though Arendt vehemently protested against this reading of her account of Eichmann's trial, it deeply upset most Jews because it conflicted with their "natural" expectation that the unspeakable evil of the Holocaust could have only been perpetrated by a radically – not banally – evil person. What the Jews understood as an attempt to exonerate Eichmann, was in fact an effort, not quite conscious on Arendt's part, at questioning the perceptual regime which undergirded their moral beliefs and their perception of evil. By claiming that the perpetrator of the unprecedented crime of genocide was "no Iago or Macbeth", endowed with no "diabolical or demonic profundity" (Arendt, 1964, p. 287), she had upset their understandable expectation that he would turn out to be a "devil" (Arendt, 1964, p. 142). Only belatedly Arendt understood, and acknowledged, that evil cannot be radical and banal at the same time (Arendt, 2017, p. 209; Cibotaru, 2023, p. 9). What is even more interesting is that the expectation of the diabolical profundity in Eichmann, challenged by Arendt, was primarily her own, something she, at

least initially, seemed not fully aware of. For the concept of the banality of evil originated in Arendt's own disappointed expectation that the monstrosity of Eichmann's actions would somehow show itself in his physique. To her disappointment, sitting in the dock during the trial, Eichmann did not look *unheimlich* at all.

Amos Elon suggested that Arendt's judgement of Eichmann was affected by "the fallacy of physiognomy" she unwittingly committed (Elon, 1964, p. xii;). The concept, suggested by John Ruskin's "emotional" or "pathetic falseness," refers to an incorrect attribution of properties to objects not inherent to them but only experienced by their viewers. According to Gombrich, the physiognomic fallacy originates in the constant scrutiny with which we scan our environment with the one vital question:

> are you friendly or hostile, a "good thing" or a "bad thing"? It may be argued that the answer to this question is as basic to the survival of any organism as are the answers to the questions of other perceptual probings. […]. [R]egarding perception as a process of categorizing, we may argue that the physiognomic categories of "smiling" or "menacing" are among our earliest and most basic responses (Gombrich, 1960, p. 232).

To sum up, one should say that the concept of primary recognition, understood as a precondition of the higher forms of recognition, is also a precondition of their denial. This warrants the conclusion that Honneth's conception of primary recognition is marred by a paradox. As the above examples demonstrate, a deliberate, self-conscious denial of recognition of a person necessarily presumes an *antecedent* recognition of that person as endowed with particular qualities which are seen as a reason to deny her higher forms of recognition. The perceived person is seen as a potential addressee of recognition but simultaneously deemed unworthy of it. This suggests that, on the one hand, the struggle for recognition cannot commence without elementary recognition of the subjects involved in it, but also, on the other, those who are denied recognition as unworthy of it, must nevertheless be recognized beforehand as potential though disqualified addressees of the recognitive attitude proper. The paradox may be attributed partly to the polysemy of the very concept of recognition (Ikäheimo & Laitinen, 2007; Ricoeur, 2005), yet the main source of the paradox involved in Honneth's concept of primary recognition lies in the fact that it is laden with normativity understood positively, at times approaching Emmanuel Levinas's definition of recognition as endowed with a "primordially ethical accent" (Levinas, 2007, p. 75) and that it is accompanied by an unwarranted disregard for the human negativity. This conclusion finds support in a more general criticism of Honneth's theory. Whitebook stressed that his approach "serves to radically reduce the conflictual nature, and therewith the intensity, of the struggle in the quest for recognition" (Whitebook, 2001, p. 266).

3.2 Triangulation and Recognition

According to Honneth, elementary recognition involves openness, devotedness, and love, and is a "foundation for all other, more substantial forms of recognition" (Honneth, 2008, p. 90). At the same time, he argues that it is morally neutral

(Honneth, 2008, p. 45). These contradictory claims generate "an air of ambivalence or indecision" concerning the status of elementary recognition in Honneth's theory (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 204). In an attempt to dispel it, Ikäheimo introduces several useful distinctions. He begins by distinguishing two meanings of reification, descriptive and critical. The reification in a descriptive sense, or, as Ikäheimo prefers "objectification", is used in the psychology of perception to refer to the "synthesizing of objects in or for consciousness from the material of sensory inputs." (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 192–193; this point will become important below). Reification in a critical sense may be subjective and objective. Having introduced another distinction between norm-mediated and interpersonal recognition, Ikäheimo criticizes Honneth for his tendency to understand all forms of recognition as norm-regulated because, as he argues, while some aspects of recognitive relationships are regulated by norms, they are not norm-regulated completely. In particular, higher ("substantial") forms of recognition are deeply interpersonal or intersubjective (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 207) as they involve axiological and deontological triangulation (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 210). Triangulation in Honneth's sense means relating to the objective world by taking up the perspective of a second person, thereby gradually decentering one's own primarily egocentric perspective (Honneth, 2008, p. 41).

Against this background, Ikäheimo claims that Honneth's revised view of primary recognition as morally neutral seriously compromises the usefulness of his conception of reification as an instrument of social critique (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 204). Triangulation, as the ability to see the world from the other's perspective, does not have to result in unequivocally positive consequences. The ability to place oneself in the position of the other serves not only benevolent aims: it helps also an extortionist, advertising agent, or con artist to achieve their aims to the detriment of other people. In other words, the instrumentalization of another cannot be purely disinterested (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 212). Thus, the reificatory attitude does not have to be disengaged or unemotional as Honneth claims, i.e. it cannot be reduced to the cold disinterested observation of others as if they were merely natural objects or things. At this point, Ikäheimo introduces another crucial distinction between unconditional and conditional ways of taking another's perspective and argues that only in the unconditional mode of axiological and deontological recognition/triangulation that the other's concerns have the same unconditional importance for one as one's own concerns (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 213). Only in the unconditional mode does the other fully and irreducibly appear to one as a person. The concerns include what is good or evil, and right and wrong from another's perspective, whereas in the conditional or prudential mode of axiological recognition of another, the import of her concerns is conditional on one's own. Ikäheimo concludes:

> It is exactly *not being seen*, and thus treated by others as a fully independent other person whose life has unconditional or irreducible importance, and/or who has an unconditional or irreducible claim for authority, that is paradigmatically experienced as being "treated like a thing"— or, in other words, being reified (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 214; emphasis added).

He adds that the reification of other persons not only assumes many forms but is also gradable, "ranging from everyday inconsiderateness or coldness, through

degrees of instrumentalisation, to psychopathic or genocidal inhumanity" (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 216).

Ikäheimo's distinction between unconditional and conditional recognition enables him to account persuasively for the negative aspect of recognition, something which was unavailable within Honneth's conceptual framework. However, he does not address explicitly the main theme of this paper which is Honneth's distinction between *Erkennen* and *Anerkennen*. For this reason, below I will focus on the concept of "seeing" emphasised in the above quote. Supplementing Ikäheimo's commendable proposal, I would like to argue that ambiguities of Honneth's position, resulting from ascribing only benevolent properties to primary recognition, stem from his inability to decide whether elementary recognitive ability, imbued with normativity, is a natural reflex undetermined by socialization *or* is acquired and socially conditioned (Honneth, 2001, p. 124). The unresolved dilemma may be rephrased as one between naturalism and constructivism in understanding human perception. I believe that the dilemma between naturalism and constructivism may be resolved, and Honneth's ambiguities dispelled, by adopting an enactivist approach to human perception. The concept of the regime of perception refers to contingently permanent (Chmielewski, 2020, p. 85) modes of perceiving reality which are enacted through processes of social interaction and communication. The concept is based on a belief that there is no perception unstructured by social determinations. The issue will be tackled with the help of three points made by Ikäheimo; one is related to the descriptive reification or objectification, the second refers to the distinction between norm-mediated and intersubjective recognitive relationships, while the third addresses the issue of perception of another.

3.3 Regime of Perception

The idea of the social determination of human perception is repeatedly discovered, rediscovered, and widely debated in various disciplines. It was prefigured by Antiphon's doctrine of the relationship between perception and politics which made him the precursor of political aesthetics (Antiphon, 2002). In his criticism of the influence of conventionally established laws on the perception of reality, he formulated the distinction between nature and convention, i.e. laws of nature, *φύσις*, and the laws of society, *νόμος*, a theme of paramount importance both in the ancient and contemporary debates. Ideas of non-objectivity of perception advocated by the sceptic movement and, in another vein, by the Stoics in their doctrine of *oikeiôsis*, demonstrate the awareness of the malleability of perception among ancient thinkers. Francis Bacon's doctrine of idola as responsible for a biased perception of the world is one of the earliest doctrines asserting the construction of perception in the philosophy of science. He believed that human illusions (*εἴδωλα*), resulting from natural constitution, education, language, and philosophical ideas, stand in the way of adequate understanding of reality, though the power of reason is able to dispel them (Bacon, 2000, p. 41). A close approximation to the idea of the perceptual regime is Ludwik Fleck's "thought style" which refers to "directed perception and appropriate assimilation of what has been perceived" (Fleck, 1979, p. 142). The

logical positivist idea of sense data recorded in protocol sentences was subjected to criticism by Karl R. Popper (2002), and then, more comprehensively, by Thomas S. Kuhn (1979) who introduced the concept of paradigm which covers a part of the meaning intended here for the perceptual regime. In psychology, the Gestalt School advocated the principle of perceptual configuration (*Prägnanz*) which suggests that humans perceive and interpret ambiguous or complex images in a way which requires the least cognitive effort. Cassirer's use of *Prägnanz* (Cassirer, 1957, p. 240) became influential in anthropology. In aesthetics, the concept of the "physiognomic fallacy" attracts a lot of attention. In sociology, Gustav Ichheiser (1966) put forward the concept of "social perception" while Berger and Luckmann (1966) advocated a comprehensive theory of the social construction of the world which involves the construction of "seeing." The practical workings of regimes of perception were demonstrated by such experiments as those of Salomon Asch (1955) and Stanley Milgram (1974), and by Wittgenstein's self-critical remark on the ability of a picture to hold one captive (Wittgenstein, 1975, §115). Directly related to Honneth's theory is Judith Butler's concept of frames "through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (lose-able or injurable) [and which] are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power. They do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance itself" (Butler, 2009, p. 1; 2021). Ikäheimo's concept of objectification as the psychological mechanism responsible for coalescing the perceived stimuli into distinguishable and stable things serves similar purposes. Aristotle's concept of ἕξις (*hexis*; *Eth. Nic.*, 1106a12; Allard-Nelson, 2001), inspired Thorstein Veblen's analysis of the emergence and functioning of socially established structures of perception, thought, and behaviour which he called "habits" (Veblen, 2007), as well as Pierre Bourdieu's habitus as "a system of permanent and transposable dispositions which, by integrating all past experiences, functions as a matrix for perception, evaluation and action and – thanks to the analogous transfer of schemas acquired in previous practice – enables the achievement of infinitely varied goals" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82–83).

Understood along similar lines, the perceptual regime denotes a set of dispositions, structured inclinations and trained abilities that are rooted not only in the human biological constitution but also in socially established rules to which individuals are habituated in the process of socialization. The enactivist nature of those rules may be understood by viewing them as emerging in the process of human interaction through which they gradually acquire semi-autonomy. The agency of those rules manifests itself in their ability to inform individual human inclinations, skills and decisions.

The rules of the perceptual regime are not timeless or completely independent of individuals. They are unintended products of human interaction, variously moulded, transformed, and eroded in confrontation with dynamic circumstances. They are thus not permanent, as per Bourdieu, but contingently permanent. Though this might sound oxymoronic, it aims to capture the idea of an individual's agency vis-a-vis the perceptual regime. While the rules of the perceptual regime are more enduring than individual acts of perceptions, intentions and predilections, thanks to which they can play a regulative role in relation to them, they are not immutable.

The rules of the perceptual regime co-constitute individual human perceptions, and, at the same time, are themselves co-constituted by individual perceptions. Though subject to those rules, individuals retain their agency in the sense that they are not helpless slaves of social determinations affecting their perceptions. On the one hand, they enactively sustain those rules by conforming to them but, on the other, those rules spurs their agency to interpret and follow them idiosyncratically, thus contributing to their modifications. While the socially established perceptual regimes consist of rules regulating individual acts of perception, it is individuals who contribute to enacting, sustaining, and undermining perceptual regimes by both obeying and transforming them (Chmielewski, 2024, p. 241).

The concept of the perceptual regime is thus based on the idea that human perceptions are not dictated to individuals by their biological make-up or imposed from the outside by ahistorical non-human structures, but emerge and are malleable under social, ethical, and political circumstances. Thus understood, the perceptual regime constitutes a supra-individual structure that enables the perception of reality in a customary way within a given social group. Such a structure emerges thanks to individual experiences, perceptual abilities and intentions, and having gained quasi-autonomy, actively informs them, and at the same time is constantly maintained and altered by them. The perceptual regime is sustained by a kind of inertia or hysteresis which accounts for the stability of reifications in perceiving objects and humans (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83; Wacquant, 2016, p. 66–67). Perceptual regimes are unstable compromises between the stabilizing inertia of their rules and disruptive idiosyncrasies of individual perceptions evoked by them. The tension, when balanced, sustains the perceptual regimes, and upsets them when the balance is disturbed.

The features attributed to perceptual regimes make it possible to define their ontological status in a way that goes beyond the two sterile oppositions between individuality and community and between naturalism and constructivism. According to this view, human perceptions and actions are informed not only by idiosyncratic first-person sense data of individual subjects but also by rules established through human interaction. Though supra-individual, they are not supra-historical or supra-human. Though they guide our perceptions, they are usually invisible; their existence and their causative power are noticeable when are violated. Thus defined ontological status of the perceptual regime suggests that it is not a product of the natural constitution of man, but a social creation. It is not historically immutable, because it is subject to changes according to dynamic circumstances.

The idea of social determination of perception is not foreign to Honneth; on the contrary, the idea functions in his writings in a variety of contexts. For example, approvingly commenting on a claim that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*, he writes that "the structure of unwritten and experience-bound moral perceptions, from which the authentic social ethic of the lower strata is constructed, in fact works like a cognitive filter through which systems of norms are presented that are hegemonic or critical of domination" (Honneth, 2007, p. 84). In discussing Habermas's theory of knowledge, he refers at length to Popper's criticism of the logical positivist conception of empirical basis as consisting of protocol sentences allowing inductive verification of general statements (Popper, 2002, p. 21) and argues that Popper's conventionalist solution to the problem of the empirical basis of science served "as an entrance into Habermas's

own argument" (Honneth, 1991, p. 212). The relationship between perception and social circumstances is also discussed throughout *Disrespect* (2007), in the context of Kantian "selective perception of reality", and the philosophical doctrines of Arendt, Putnam, Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, and many others. Also, Honneth's frequent references to "perceptions of injustice" (esp. Honneth, 1995, p. 212; Honneth, 2007, p. 87) resemble the concept of epistemic injustice developed by Miranda Fricker (2007, 2013, 2018). Nevertheless, his awareness of this issue does not translate itself into his theory of primary recognition, leaving it essentially vague.

3.4 Norms and Interpersonality

Accepting Ikäheimo's solution to the paradox, I would like to employ the outlined concept of the perceptual regime to contest some of his subsidiary claims, starting with the concept of descriptive reification (objectification) in the psychological sense. Ikäheimo claims that there is no organized consciousness of the world without reification in this sense, i.e. without synthesising the received sensations into independently existing distinguishable objects (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 193). This seems incontestable. However, his account of objectification does not explain what is responsible for coalescing the stream of sense data into stable and distinguishable objects. I suggest that it is the mastery of the rules of the socially established perceptual regime that makes it possible for a subject to perceive the received sense data as objects. Its rules inculcated into our consciousness through emulation of actions and reactions of others in a given community enable us to view the world as organized and ordered in a specific way. It is through such processes that natural human perceptual abilities are modelled, informed, and made operative.

Employing the distinction between norm-mediated and interpersonal attitudes, Ikäheimo criticises Honneth for overemphasizing the role of norms in the recognitive processes. His main point is that there are aspects of interhuman relations that are "purely intersubjective" in the sense that "they are not a response to norms, whether institutional or informal" (Ikäheimo, 2021, p. 197). While it may be true that Honneth attributed an excessive weight to norms in recognition, Ikäheimo seems to go too far in the opposite direction. He seems not fully to appreciate the extent to which human cognition and action are permeated by rules and norms. Even if most of them are informal and non-institutionalized, or even non-verbalized, they do exert their regulative force. Human interactions are regulated by rules and norms spontaneously emerging in all spaces of human life. What is particularly important in the present context, such rules emerge at the most rudimentary level of processes of perception which from the earliest moment are subject to rules and norms responsible for the above-mentioned phenomenon of coalescing, or objectification of, the stream of sense data into distinguishable entities. To refer to the much-discussed example of a child's smile, the research suggests that the early smile, occurring even in the pre-natal stage, is only a reflex. Only after several weeks of her life, the child learns to employ a smile as a means of communication with her mother (Chmielewski, 2024, p. 234). Generalizing this example one could say that through interaction with her social environment, a child is introduced into a perceptual regime which plays the rôle of an enabling factor of her perception of

reality and, at the same time, informs her perception with normativity. Supervenient upon natural perceptual faculties, the regime of perception imposes a specific order on the stream of sensations enabling one to perceive things in an organised way, and is a part of a more general structure of wider cognitive regimes constructed through social interaction. The order embodied in the thus constructed modes of perception saturates the perception with normativity which both enables the perception and simultaneously makes it "non-objective." Following Jacques Rancière one could say that the socially enacted perceptual regimes partition the sensible, thus both enabling and affecting the way we perceive. Both Rancière's "distribution of the sensible" and the perceptual regime advocated here refer to sense perception as disclosing the existence of something in common (Rancière, 2011, p. 12) and simultaneously hiding other things from view. Since processes of interaction and communication, instrumental in the construction of the modes of perception, are conducted within different languages, they are likely to produce more or less differing perceptual, cognitive, linguistic, and behavioural regimes which we have to master to be able to participate in those linguistic communities. Recognizing the other, as recognizing things, though growing upon a natural endowment, needs to be learned through participation in the communities of experience (Dewey, 1934, p. 344). Honneth's error seems to stem from his understanding of normativity in a positive and universalist way, and neglecting the fact that normativity is socially constituted in a variety of conflicting ways.

4 Conclusion

The argument of this paper points to the conclusion that Honneth is right in arguing that perception involves primary recognition saturated by normativity. The problems in his theory result not from his blending of primary recognition and perception. They are rather a consequence of his failure to account for negative attitudes, such as aggression, cruelty, denigration, contempt, intolerance, reification, and xenophobia which, just like positive ones, also presume the primary recognition.

The issue of primary recognition should not be seen only as a minor difficulty in a comprehensive doctrine of recognition, a quandary to be solved by conceptual ingenuity. Its broader significance may be appreciated from Joel Whitebook's charge against "Habermasians", Honneth among them, for their mistaken belief that "Unless the self is socially, that is to say, intersubjectively constituted all the way down, the status of the rational animal is seen to be in jeopardy. There is a tendency therefore to systematically deny the existence of any pre- and extrasocial dimension of the self" (Whitebook, 2001, p. 259; also Honneth & Whitebook, 2016, p. 171). He criticizes Honneth for neglecting the Hobbesian element in humans as "isolated, naturally driven, asocial, and strategically oriented individuals" (Whitebook, 2001, p. 257). For this reason, as he claims, it is impossible to make sense of the all-the-way-down socialisation. Whitebook also eschews the idea of a scale of socialization and the associated belief that human-shaped creatures become genuinely human only when achieving a certain point on that scale, and questions the view that human negativity may only result from the recesses of untamed parts of human nature lurking below this point. In this, he differs from Ikäheimo who adopts the idea of a scale of human moral (de)gradation.

Instead, Whitebook claims that human negativity is to be attributed to the "unconquerable nature" which is not amenable to the processes of socialization.

Whitebook's rendering of the issue echoes the controversy between the Rousseauan and Hobbesian *Weltanschauungen*. The argument of this paper implies a more serious challenge. The uncomfortable point is that socialization to whatever degree will not necessarily lead to sociability or goodness. The evil committed by humans cannot be attributed only to the fact that they are insufficiently socialized or that some part of their nature is entirely immune to socialization. Evil is being committed no less eagerly and no less frequently, though possibly with greater sophistication, by humans thoroughly socialized. The idea of socially constituted perceptual and cognitive regimes, which inform human mutual perception, enables one to stress that they play an important role in the processes of socializing humans in a variety of discrepant, discordant, and conflicting ways. Since humans are evaluated morally from the point of view of those differing and frequently conflicting regimes, their worth is inevitably seen in differing and conflicting ways. Moreover, and more importantly, those mutually exclusive cognitive regimes are responsible for the formation of the human moral sense. For this reason, the very concepts of human "negativity" and "positivity" do not possess universally binding and compelling content: being constructed in diverse ways, they are thus imbued with sometimes irreconcilable meanings. If that is so, this makes it impossible to say in absolute terms whether humans are intrinsically good or intrinsically evil.

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