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Epistemic Injustice and Recognition Theory: A New Conversation — Afterword

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Abstract

The notion of recognition is an ethically potent resource for understanding human relational needs; and its negative counterpart, misrecognition, an equally potent resource for critique. Axel Honneth's rich account focuses our attention on recognition's role in securing basic self-confidence, moral self-respect, and self-esteem. With these loci of recognition in place, we are enabled to raise the intriguing question whether each of these may be extended to apply specifically to the epistemic dimension of our agency and selfhood. Might we talk intelligibly—while staying in tune with Honneth's concepts and their Hegelian key—of a generic idea of epistemic recognition? Such an idea might itself be seen to apply at the same three levels to indicate: first, basic epistemic self-confidence; second, our status as epistemically responsible; and third, a certain epistemic self-esteem that reflects the epistemic esteem we receive from others. The papers in this volume surely sound a chord in the affirmative, and together they steer us towards a multifaceted conception of how epistemic injustice is related to epistemic misrecognition, and indeed how we might construe a positive relation of epistemic recognition.

Keywords: Axel Honneth, recognition, misrecognition, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, hermeneutical injustice

The notion of *recognition* is a multifaceted and ethically potent resource for understanding certain psychologically and morally fundamental needs. In Axel Honneth's (1996) influential and philosophically rich treatment of the notion we find recognition operating in three dimensions: it names what we need from others in our ongoing struggle to psychologically differentiate ourselves and maintain a secure and confident sense of self; it names what we need from others in order to be able to respect ourselves as moral subjects, essentially as a reflection of the moral respect we receive from others; and it names the esteem we need from others in order to sustain our self-esteem in respect of some aspect of our specific mode of self-realization. The recognition model represents human beings as

differentiating and valuing themselves essentially in relation to others, and when that mode of relating affirms our sense of self appropriately we have recognition.

With these ideas of psychological and ethical recognition in place regarding basic self-confidence, moral self-respect, and self-esteem, we can raise the intriguing question whether each of these may be extended to apply specifically to the epistemic dimension of our agency and selfhood. Might we talk intelligibly—while staying in tune with Honneth’s concepts and their Hegelian key—of a generic idea of *epistemic recognition*? Such an idea might itself be seen to apply at the same three levels so that it may indicate, first, basic epistemic self-confidence; second, our status as epistemically responsible; and third, a certain epistemic self-esteem that reflects the epistemic esteem we receive from others. The papers in this issue surely sound a chord in the affirmative. But as a short epilogue to reading them, we might consider the general form of the question from, as ever, the point of view of the negative: *misrecognition*. Might we conceive of epistemic injustice, whether testimonial or hermeneutical, as a kind of epistemic *misrecognition*?¹

A particularly fertile patch for cultivating this general idea is chapter 6 of Honneth’s (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition*, in which he characterizes the three kinds of misrecognition that correlate with the three dimensions of recognition. There we find, first, a characterization of physical abuse as causing its victim to lose trust in her very self in a manner that “affects all practical dealings with other subjects, even at a physical level” (133). Second, he characterizes a lack of respect manifested, for instance, by a denial of rights or by social ostracism as causing a loss of self-respect that is centered on “the feeling of not enjoying the status of a full-fledged partner to interaction, equally endowed with moral rights” (133). And third, he presents cases of the “evaluative degradation” of a person or group’s particular “pattern of self-realization” so that they suffer a loss of self-esteem (134).

The first idea would apply at the most basic level of the person’s sense of epistemic selfhood, and so the connection with epistemic injustice requires one to mine down to its deepest possible effects on the subject’s sense of her own epistemic agency, and perhaps to pay attention to those interpersonal relations that normally nurture that agency in order to see how they can fail. Paul Giladi (2018) has discussed epistemic misrecognition at this level, arguing it amounts to a “discursive abuse.” And in an alternative focus, bringing our attention to the nurturing behavior that builds a person’s fundamental confidence as an epistemic subject in their own right, Matthew Congdon (2017) has identified the kind of *epistemic love* that constitutes epistemic recognition of this most basic kind.

The second of Honneth’s forms of misrecognition is described as the “feeling of not enjoying the status of a full-fledged partner to interaction” is precisely what

¹ This connection was first made by Jane McConkey (2004).

someone on the receiving end of a systematic testimonial injustice may experience—their word receives reduced credibility owing to a prejudice that tracks them through different regions of the social world (a “tracker” prejudice, of which perhaps the only examples are identity prejudices, such as those of gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, and so on). Such a prejudicial downgrading of one’s word is precisely the sort of thing apt to give someone a palpable sense of possessing less than full-fledged epistemic status—rather, it makes clear that one possesses a baseline status well below that of fellow epistemic agent. Whether such an experience triggers a serious loss of epistemic self-respect will surely depend on the circumstances; but in persistent cases where a person has repeated experiences of testimonial injustice, and especially under conditions of oppression, the result might very well be that the person experiences a catastrophic loss of epistemic self-respect, even if she *also* knows how wrongfully misjudged she is. If she is a member of a community that provides solidarity, critical understanding, and forms of epistemic respect of its own, then she may be well equipped to resist internalizing the epistemic disrespect directed at her, but others less well supported may be more susceptible to the internal erosion of epistemic morale.

The third dimension of misrecognition, which is the loss of self-esteem caused by evaluative degradation of who or what one is—one’s specific “pattern of self-realization”—also finds a clear epistemic counterpart in contexts of epistemic injustice. This time the clearest counterpart is a case of hermeneutical rather than testimonial injustice. Imagine someone who is hermeneutically marginalized with respect to a region of their experience—an elderly person, perhaps, who is in a new romantic-sexual relationship and wants to be able to go out on dates with her partner in a normal way but lives in a social context where prevailing attitudes are that it is unbecoming for elderly people to have a sex life. Such a person is thereby a member of a hermeneutically marginalized group in respect of sexuality, as members of this group under-contribute to shared concepts, meanings, and interpretive tropes regarding an important area of their experience. She therefore has experiences which, even if she and some of her friends understand them perfectly, she is prevented from rendering fully intelligible across social space to members of other groups and perhaps even some members of her own group too. This is a situation of hermeneutical injustice, and it is a situation in which the elderly person’s understanding of her own pattern of self-realization is unfairly met with disapproving or even disgusted bewilderment. In such a case, there is both misrecognition of a kind that may cause a loss of self-esteem and an epistemic misrecognition of a kind that may cause loss of epistemic self-esteem. Again, this woman may be robustly independent-minded and remain entirely unaffected by the disapproving incomprehension of others, but more likely she will suffer somewhat from their failure to make proper sense of her behavior and feel unduly insecure in

her own judgment of the situation. The lack of epistemic esteem afforded by others may corrode her epistemic self-esteem, leaving her questioning her own judgment and epistemic orientation to the world.

Distinctively *epistemic* recognition seems to have emerged from these brief reflections as a matter of one's being neither unfairly underestimated as a giver of knowledge (no testimonial injustice) nor unfairly disadvantaged in one's ability to share social understandings across social space (no hermeneutical injustice). All well and good, but perhaps there would be something unsatisfying about sticking to an exclusively negative approach? One of the intellectual riches of recognition theory is that it offers something positive—an account of interpersonally generated positive self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, directing our attention to the social relations and arrangements that encourage, nurture, and protect them. Accordingly, one of the things we might hope for most of all from bringing ideas of epistemic injustice into conversation with recognition theory is a more positive idea of those practices and ways of relating that really support distinctively epistemic confidence, epistemic self-respect, and epistemic self-esteem. The papers in this issue offer many different insights into the phenomenology of positive epistemic esteem among other things, but I would like to highlight it here and venture a tentative outline characterization: positive epistemic self-esteem might be conceived as a way of relating that is distinctive of *epistemic cooperation among people whose baseline conception of each other is that of generic epistemic equal*. (I say “generic” to signal that this epistemic egalitarian attitude is entirely compatible with asymmetries of specific epistemic authority such as A knowing of B that B is an expert as regards the matter in hand and so should be deferred to.) The point is really that the spirit of epistemic cooperation generates the special ethos we might describe as that of *mutual epistemic recognition*. This ethos pervades the everyday interactions of people who look to each other for epistemic goods such as reasons, evidence, information, and social interpretations, and it defines the spirit in which we inquire, debate and discuss together, or simply chat together sharing simple everyday observations. The cooperative ethos of mutual epistemic recognition is a creative resource for many different kinds of epistemic enterprise, from committed factual inquiry, through epistemic playfulness and creativity, through to a person's innermost flourishing as a matter of personal epistemic affirmation. The positive aspects of epistemic recognition are surely many, various, and precious.

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