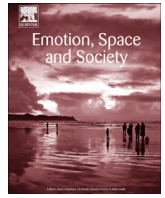




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The family and the bonds of recognition

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ABSTRACT

I draw upon the resources of the philosophy of recognition, as well as recent research associated with existentialist, psychoanalytic and family-therapy forms of psychotherapy, to develop an account of the family as a distinctive and relatively autonomous system of affective recognition. Those forms of recognition that are most essential in the broader social and political spheres—for instance, those found in law and in contractual relations—generally concern our recognition of each other as discrete, self-conscious, individual agents who are at bottom independent of each other. In contrast, it is argued that familial recognition is founded upon a rather different conception of selfhood, one that emphasizes our inherent porosity with respect to other selves, and so on our incapacity to set ourselves apart from others. Moreover, familial recognition is enacted primarily at the affective, preconscious level, such that members find themselves implicated in each other's self-identities prior to their being in a position to fully appreciate, in a more self-conscious and independent manner, the nature and extent of their involvement. I follow Hegel in arguing that, for these reasons, familial recognition is not only autonomous with respect to certain of the forms of recognition governing the wider social world, but that it is in certain respects at odds with them.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I draw upon some of the resources of the philosophy of recognition, as well as recent research associated with existentialist, psychoanalytic and family-therapy forms of psychotherapy, to sketch out an account of the family as a distinctive and relatively autonomous system of affective recognition. Those forms of recognition that are most essential in the broader social and political spheres—for instance, those found in law and in contractual relations—generally concern our recognition of each other as discrete, self-conscious, individual agents who are at bottom independent of each other. In contrast, it is argued that familial recognition is founded upon a rather different conception of selfhood, one that emphasizes our inherent porosity with respect to other selves, and so on our *incapacity* to simply set ourselves apart from others. Moreover, familial recognition is enacted primarily at the affective, pre-conscious level, such that members find themselves implicated in each other's self-identities prior to their being in a position to fully appreciate, in a more self-conscious and independent manner, the nature and extent of their involvement. I follow Hegel in arguing that, for these reasons, familial recognition is not only autonomous with respect to certain of the forms of

recognition governing the wider social world, but that it is in certain respects at odds with them. For these reasons, the social theory of recognition would do well to acknowledge that there may in fact be a fundamental and ultimately irreconcilable tension between the family and the civil spheres of human life.

2. The autonomy of familial recognition and its potential opposition to forms of recognition operative in the civil sphere

The concept of recognition has become an important tool for allowing us to understand both the nature and normative foundations of human social life. Harkening back to Hegel's influential argument that our very identities as independent, self-conscious selves depend ultimately upon our participation in established and enduring systems of mutual recognition with other selves, contemporary thinkers like Charles Taylor, Jessica Benjamin, and Axel Honneth, among others, have attempted to demonstrate the precise ways in which the distinctive demands of intersubjective recognition underlie both our interpersonal relationships and the broader cultural and political institutions that shape our lives.¹

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E-mail addresses: david.ciavatta@ryerson.ca, davidciavatta@yahoo.com.¹ See Hegel 1967; Taylor 1992; Honneth 1995; Honneth 2007, ch. 7; Benjamin 1988. For readings of Hegel's philosophy specifically in the light of the theme of recognition, see Williams 1997 and Wildt 1982.

From the point of view of this tradition, the development of individuality and independence from other selves is neither prior to, nor fundamentally at odds with, our involvement in social life. On the contrary, it is only in and through our constant and enduring immersion in various forms of intersubjective recognition, and in and through our developing appreciation of the demands that recognizing others *qua* selves place on us, that we can actualize ourselves as the independent, individual agents that we are. Just as my full-fledged experience of myself as being the sole and proper owner of some item of property can occur only in the context of a concrete, intersubjectively generated institution of private property—an institution in terms of which others actually live in the recognition of my singular, exclusive claim to property as a right—so too my experience of myself as an independent, efficacious agent, defining my own way of life on my own terms, can reach its fruition and full actualization only in an intersubjective world in which others feel compelled to recognize my independence and autonomy. For, just as, in the complete absence of a recognized institution of property, my hold on external goods would become tenuous at best—for what I own at any one time is reduced to that sphere of immediate goods that I manage to secure against the possessive desires of others, there being nothing in place that allows my property to carry a recognized, objective weight of its own *qua* property²—so too would my experience of myself as a free, autonomous being fail to secure for itself corroboration in the objective world in the absence of a socio-cultural world populated by selves committed to valuing my autonomy and independence (see Honneth, 1995, ch.5). The generation of a concrete, objective sphere structured by practices of recognition is thus posited as an irreducible condition of human existence and of human experience generally.

From the point of view of the theory of recognition, it would seem that the institution of the family, itself understood as a concrete sphere structured in terms of practices of recognition, ought to take on an especially important role within the general theory of social life. For it is typically in the context of the familial sphere that we as selves first develop our initial routes into the intersubjective domain, and, indeed, it seems that our particular ways of relating to our family members—our practical modes of recognizing, and of being recognized by, them—come to shape the deepest layers of our self-identities and of our relationship to the world generally. Those particular practices of recognition that serve to constitute us as family members, it seems, provide a kind of crucible for the child's entry into the wider domain of recognition, and also provide adults with a distinctive kind of shared interiority that continues to mediate their relation to themselves and to that wider domain.³

Indeed, Hegel and Honneth, among other recognition theorists, have singled out the institution of the family as a distinctive and relatively autonomous sphere of intersubjective recognition, one that operates according to its own distinctive norms, its own unique conception of what actually counts as recognition, and, correlatively, its own conception of what it is to be a self in relation to others.⁴ Certainly families can be more or less integrated into the

wider community, and the boundaries between family members, friends, close neighbors, and paid caregivers can certainly become blurry in many cases. Nevertheless, it seems that on the whole we still find it important to distinguish between familial and non-familial others—and not simply for external, legal or instrumental reasons, but because we experience those particular selves who we recognize as family (or as verging on family) to be uniquely important in recognizing and corroborating aspects of our very self-identities as selves: to affirm and recognize those particular selves *as family*, and in turn to experience oneself recognized by them *as family*, is to realize and value aspects of one's own self-identity that could not be realized without them.

Of course, the family is informed by, and inevitably has to answer to, several other socio-cultural structures that adopt other forms and norms of recognition, and these significantly shape the ways that we recognize our family members. For instance, the orientation of modern Western liberalism towards the recognition of the inalienable rights and freedoms of all individuals has led to the formation of various social practices and institutions—public education and healthcare, children's rights advocacy, state-sponsored social work, new cultures of parenting that focus on respecting the individuality and autonomy of the child—that have direct impacts on what sorts of activities and interactions tend to take place in the family, and that also make us more answerable, in our dealings with our family members, to the ways that members are recognized by agencies beyond the family. Similarly, the entrenched gender roles operative in culture at large of course shape the ways in which spouses of different sexes interact with one another, as well as the ways parents treat their differently sexed children. In these respects, then, the family is not wholly autonomous, and can indeed be conceived as a *transmitter* of the values and forms of recognition that constitute the larger socio-economic terrain: for instance, a girl with parents of different sexes might learn, through the ways her parents interact with each other, and through the ways they treat her differently than her brother, some of the basic forms of recognizing masculinity and femininity operative in the wider world; or perhaps the child learns, through the ways her parents consult with her in making certain decisions, something of the spirit of the democratic decision-making that informs her culture. Given its role as a transmitter of social norms, the family may also function as a kind of training ground for social critique, as for instance in cases in which children of a same-sex couple come into the civil sphere with a more developed sensitivity to the oppressive character of heterosexual norms. Overall, it very well may be that the family is the most important of such transmitters of social norms, and thereby also an important site for their potential transformation—even in the modern world, in which the family seems generally to play a less prominent role in people's lives than it formerly did.

However, if the family is thought primarily as something that prepares children for their eventual involvement in those forms of recognition that are constitutive of the wider social and cultural world, then we risk overlooking the possibility that family recognition might have its own distinctive and autonomous role to play in human life, one that is not directly beholden to the demands specific to society. Moreover, we risk overlooking the possibility that familial recognition operates with its own distinctive norms, and makes its own distinctive claims on our loyalties and on our sense of what ultimately matters, claims that are peculiar to it and not ultimately answerable to the authority that other forms of intersubjective recognition command—for instance, those associated with our respect for our fellow citizens, or for universal human rights (see Honneth, 1995, ch. 5). Indeed, it may well be that, if there are forms of recognition that are peculiar to the familial realm—forms that perhaps allow us to realize aspects of our self-identity

² Here I am drawing upon a version of Hegel's argument that private property ultimately presupposes a functioning intersubjective institution that recognizes a right to such property. See, for instance, Hegel 1967, par. 71, where Hegel argues that the logic of private property itself points us toward the necessity and logical priority of a field of contractual relations between selves.

³ For a philosophical perspective on the distinctive role of familial recognition in shaping our self-identities and our overall experience of intersubjective life, see Ciavatta 2009. On this point, see also the influential work of John Russon, for instance in Russon 2003.

⁴ Hegel 1967, sec. 158–181; Honneth 2007, ch. 7. See also Wildt 1982; and Blasche 2004.

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