



Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy

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*Recognition and Repitition: On Narrating Identities*

Special Issue I | 2021



## Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy

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Contact: [esjp@esphil.eur.nl](mailto:esjp@esphil.eur.nl)

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## Editorial | Special Issue I, 2021

It is with great pleasure that we present you the first special issue of the *Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy*, which is the fruit of the collaboration with ESPShil's master's students pursuing the Research Practice specialisation. It is a collaboration that we hope will continue to flourish in years to come, with the aim of enabling the development, articulation and curation of outstanding work from master's students in thematic special issues. This year's theme, conceived and elaborated by the students, was the negotiation of identity and difference through processes of recognition and repetition.

As part of the Research Practice specialisation, the Graduate Symposium *Recognition & Repetition: On Narrating Identities* was organised to much acclaim. It offered a platform to exchange ideas between the students Mala Dengkeng, Jip Maat and Rodney Ramdas, who delivered outstanding papers, and our invited speakers Dr Sjoerd van Tuinen, Dr Gijs van Oenen and Dr Victoria Fareld, as well as the attending undergraduate and postgraduate students and ESPhil's PhD candidates.

The present issue collects revised versions of the student papers, along with a short contribution by our international invited speaker, Dr Victoria Fareld.

In his essay, *The Meta-Ethics of Political Recognition*, Jip Maat scrutinises the metaethical assumptions that sustain the distinction that informs Charles Taylor's and Axel Honneth's projects, the distinction, that is, of recognition on the basis of equal universal traits, on the one hand, and on the basis of particular individuating traits, on the other. Maat argues that, notwithstanding their differences, Taylor and Honneth espouse forms of realism that fall short of consolidating theoretically the socio-political emancipation they envision, by reinscribing the distinction of difference and equality within a Western universalist framework.

The essay of Rodney Ramdas, *Does Recognition Entail Epistemic Injustice?* pursues the epistemic limitations of recognition, with a primary focus on Axel Honneth, and a closer look on a distinction drawn by the latter, namely between ideological recognition and recognition (*simpliciter*). Contra Honneth, Ramdas argues that this distinction cannot be rigorously maintained, insofar as epistemic injustice operates in every form of recognition. Moreover, epistemic injustice is bound to translate into power practices, as the epistemically dominant oppress, through recognition, the underprivileged that they recognise.

Mala Dengkeng expands the temporal frame of recognition by examining the recurrence of its force within the teaching and thus construction of history. Her essay *The Discordant Narrative: An analysis of the 'Canon of the Netherlands'* employs Ricoeur's narrative theory to show why the revision of the canon in recent years, despite addressing some of the criticisms levelled against its original format, could not do justice to the open-endedness of history: the repetitive weaving of a set of events, persons, or things into the fabric of national identity, creates a temporally, geographically and ethnically closed totality, as the object of historical recognition.

Finally, Dr Victoria Fareld's contribution *Being Recognizable: From a Human to a Posthuman Relational Ethics* takes a step back to question the post-Hegelian construction of recognition of the other, as always exclusively human. Drawing on contemporary critical theory, Fareld's essay showcases the need of extending the concept of recognition to the non-human, before proceeding to query the relevance of the concept, as well as of traditional categories such as identity, subjectivity and agency, within a renewed paradigm of relational ethics.

We hope that you will enjoy reading these essays as much as we enjoyed composing and discussing them. During the most solitary days of the pandemic, when creativity and theoretical exchange appeared like a daydream, the present undertaking helped to remind us of its reality and significance. It was not going to be easy, and it wasn't. A special thanks goes to Nathalie Maria Kirch and ESJP's editorial team for their unwavering support and a round of textual applause to Jip Maat, Rodney Ramdas and Mala Dengkeng for their achievement.

Dr Georgios Tsagdis  
Research Practice Coordinator  
and Guest Editor

## About the ESJP Special Issue

The Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy (ESJP) is a double-blind peer-reviewed student journal that publishes the best philosophical papers written by students from the Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam and from the Humanities Programme of the Erasmus University College.

The special issue is the result of a collaboration between the ESJP and the EUR Master Programme Philosophy Now. In this collaboration, students organize a research symposium and publish essays which all revolve around a common theme. The special issue provides students with the opportunity realize their first official academic publication, and allows them to develop their editing and writing skills.

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# The Metaethics of Political Recognition

Jip Maat

*Within the contemporary debate surrounding political recognition, Charles Taylor, and Axel Honneth have both proposed to make a conceptual distinction between the equal recognition of universal characteristics and particular recognition of people for their individuating properties. In this essay, I aim to explicate the metaethical assumptions made by both these authors so as to go beyond the purely normative arguments that have been proposed in support of them. Through a close reading of their main works, especially *The Politics of Recognition* (Taylor 1992) and *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1995), I aim to show that both philosophers adhere to particular types of moral realism. This insistence on moral realism, I argue, leaves both conceptual frameworks unable to fulfil the emancipatory promise that they at first sight seem to make. I will show that both Taylor's non-naturalist and Honneth's naturalist approach to moral realism universalize western standards. Taylor's non-natural moral realism reduces his politics of difference down to a politics of equal recognition, which he argues against as being unjustly homogenizing and reflective of a hegemonic western perspective. Honneth's natural realism in turn lacks the empirical basis on which it claims to ground its universal validity and can therefore be considered to engage in a problematic universalization of western standards as well.*

Over the past thirty years, the concept of recognition played an important role in social, moral, and political philosophy, especially when applied to multiculturalism, political integration, and emancipation movements. Two of the most important contributors to the establishment of contemporary recognition philosophy are Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth, who, though both heavily inspired by Hegel, have approached recognition from different contemporary philosophical backgrounds. As both of these writers underline the importance of both universal and particularistic forms of recognition and hold recognition to be the core demand in social struggles, they are often positioned together in opposition to theorists such as Nancy Fraser, who relativizes the role of recognition and emphasizes redistribution instead (Mark 2014).

The aim of this essay is twofold. Firstly, I aim to explicate the metaethical frameworks that both writers use in their theories of political recognition. I will be looking at the semantic, epistemological, and ontological status that moral propositions have for both Taylor and Honneth and classify their metaethical position accordingly. In this way, I mean to show that there exists an important difference between the ways in which Taylor and Honneth conceptualize both the normative demand for and the function of political recognition, but that both thinkers are rooted in a framework of moral realism. Secondly, I want to use these metaethical frameworks to reflect upon the validity and aims of the theories of recognition themselves. I will show that knowing more about the nature of the moral judgments and propositions that feature in Taylor's and Honneth's theories allows us to formulate new types of criticism against these theories.

## 1. Two Theories of Recognition

### 1.1 Charles Taylor's Politics of Recognition

Taylor's essay *The Politics of Recognition* (1992) has been credited as the main source of the contemporary revival of political recognition theories (Thompson 2006). However, this work does not constitute a complete theory of recognition. In order to reconstruct the theoretical model from which Taylor arrives at his normative conclusions about recognition, this paper draws from two of Taylor's earlier works, *Sources of The Self* (1989) and *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991).

In order to understand Taylor's views on recognition, we have to first understand his notion of the self, or identity. Identity, to Taylor, is a fundamentally moral concept, in the sense that it consists of the moral commitments we make, of those ethical principles with which we come to identify ourselves throughout our lives (Taylor 1989, 27). Though we may not at all times be conscious of all our moral identifications, we cannot do without them in our making sense of the world. The set of fundamental identifications forms a framework or 'horizon of significance' (Taylor 1991) against which particular things become meaningful, evil, or morally good. Our identities are often to a large extent made up of identifications with or commitments to certain groups of people, such as religions, nationalities, or traditions. I may define myself as a Sunni Muslim, a European or a Trotskyist, or even a combination of these identities. What we really do when we define ourselves by means of such groups, Taylor claims, is to make a commitment to the values and moral predilections that we believe this community to hold (Taylor 1989, 27). The establishment of our horizons of significance through our identification with moral commitments is a dialogical process, which means that it can only take place in our interaction with other people (Taylor 1991, 32-33). This fundamentally social nature of identity formation shows the Hegelian influences in Taylor's work and is used by Taylor to differentiate his work from what he perceives to be a monological tendency in modern conceptions of identity (Taylor 1991, 34). Rather than a mere fact about genesis, the social dimension is a constant factor in the process of identity formation. What is it about this social nature of dialogical processes that provides them with the power to generate stable normative notions or horizons of significance that monological self-definition lacks? The answer to this is that social interaction allows for recognition to take place. It is by the recognition of others that certain things do in fact have actual significance that we come to establish them firmly as our horizons of significance.

As Taylor notes in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), it would be wrong to assert that we can just choose any moral notion to identify ourselves with, and that this notion thereby automatically gains the significance or value that is needed for it to become a horizon of significance by the recognition of others (Taylor 1991, 36-38). It is only against the background of certain formerly established significant questions that a notion, conceived of here as a possible answer to such a question, becomes significant itself. In addition to the established significance of certain questions, Taylor holds that moral claims need to entail an ontological claim about the value of their objects if they are to be significant. It would not be enough, as Taylor points out, to hold the fact that I have the same exact height as some tree on the Siberian plain as being constitutive of my identity if I do not also believe that there is something inherently good in me having this height (Taylor 1991, 36). For Taylor, recognition is a fundamental criterion for moral commitments to become part of one's horizons of significance. The human demand for meaning, and thereby for recognition, combined with the modern value of equality has manifested itself in two ways. The first one of these is connected to universalism, in the sense that it desperately tries not to make any moral distinctions between people. In these politics of equal recognition (PER), all people are respected or recognized equally for some universally shared attribute that they are all presumed to possess. The politics of difference (POD) on the other hand are mainly derived from the value of respecting and preserving people's authenticity. Both POD and PER seek to recognize every person, but where PER recognizes all these people for what they have in common, the POD recognizes these people exactly for what individuates them.

Though both of these politics express egalitarian values, Taylor argues that it is a POD that we should pursue, as all forms of PER tend to lead to the misrecognition of certain groups of people. His argument for this claim, to which we shall return in chapter 3, goes as follows. PER present themselves as being blind to difference, in the sense that they embrace and seek to recognize those aspects of identity that are shared universally. In proclaiming such universal properties without considering the actual differences among cultures however, PERs homogenize heterogeneous groups of people by forcing them into a mould that is untrue to them. Since proper recognition, for Taylor, is a demand for the construction of the stable horizons of significance that we need in order to form our identities, misrecognition through difference-blindness may hinder our identity formation. To further problematize the homogenizing tendencies of a PER, Taylor points out that the supposedly universal and neutral mould into which different

people(s) are cast is itself an expression of the values of one hegemonic culture. Those values that we ought to recognize according to a PER then reflect a particular, dominant perspective, which forces already oppressed minority groups to conform to hegemonic standards and give up their particularity. One example of this can be found in Simone de Beauvoir's critique on Plato's conception of equality between the sexes. Though Plato says that because sex is an accidental quality men and women are equally qualified to join the guardian class, he holds that in order for women to achieve this they will have to train and live like men (Bergoffen and Burke 2020). Equal treatment or recognition for women is thus dependent on those women adapting themselves to and upholding masculine, hegemonic standards. A PER should for this reason be supplanted by a POD, which allows us to recognize people for aspects of their identity that they want to be recognized for themselves. Women, in this POD view, should not have to adapt themselves to better fit the male image if they are to receive recognition, but should instead be recognized for their own properties, values and strengths.

## 1.2 Axel Honneth and the Struggle for Recognition

As we have seen in the previous section, Taylor sees identity formation as dialogically constituted through social recognition, in a manner similar to Hegel's intersubjective framework of recognition. One aspect of Hegel's early philosophy that Taylor seemingly ignores, but that is rigorously adapted and integrated in the work of Axel Honneth, is the idea that the historical development of societies follows a certain inherent logic, constituted by the particular modes of recognition present in such societies. As Honneth finds Hegel's dialectical explanation of historical processes both unfinished and unsatisfyingly metaphysical however, he reconstructs a naturalized or empirical account of recognition inspired by philosopher and psychologist George Herbert Mead (Honneth 1996, 68-72). The term naturalism is used throughout this paper to indicate theories that do not invoke any super- or extranatural explanations, that is, theories that only use explanations grounded in empirical facts that can be studied by the natural sciences. Honneth's naturalized theory of recognition is largely inspired by the pragmatist philosophy of the late 19th and early 20th century and starts from the assumption that it is only when confronted with misunderstandings in social interaction that people become aware of their own subjectivity. One only becomes a self-conscious person through perceiving one's own actions from a second-person perspective, and for this an elementary form of recognition is needed, since we cannot imagine the other as having a perspective without recognizing them as a person first. This only explicates the epistemic dimension of recognition however, and thereby only marks the first step in Hegel's larger project, which is concerned with the ways in which recognition forms our practical or moral relation to self. In order to explain the normative and developmental dimensions of recognition, Honneth refers to Mead's child psychology and his conception of the way that children learn moral norms. In order to reflect upon the 'good and bad' in their own behaviour, Mead claims, the only standards that children have are their memories of their parents' reactions towards their earlier behaviour. As children grow older and are confronted with more and more different people's moral standards however, they slowly come to construct a self-image (or a 'me' as opposed to an 'I') based on their interactions with a generalized other. This generalized other in which concrete moral positions are synthesized to general societal norms is what allows Mead to link recognition to the development of one's practical relation to self (Honneth 1992, 78). By adopting the perspective of the generalized other, we come to see ourselves not just as subjects, but as members of a society in which we are recognized by a group to the extent that we recognize the other members of this group in the same way.

Following both Hegel and Mead, Honneth claims that there exist three different forms or 'patterns' of recognition, and that each of these patterns corresponds to a certain practical relation to self that is necessary for the development of an individual's positive attitude towards oneself.

1. Love, which is characterized as a personal, affectionate form of recognition in which people's needs and emotions are recognized through emotional support. The corresponding relation to self of love is a basic self-confidence (Honneth 1995, 95-107).
2. Rights make up the second mode of recognition, which is cognitive rather than affective and is concerned with people's moral responsibility. By mutually recognizing each other as legal entities capable of free and rational thought, people come to see themselves as members of society in which everyone is worthy of basic rights. This self-respect is the relation to self corresponding to legal recognition (Honneth 1995, 107-111).
3. Solidarity then, is the final mode of recognition, in which a person's individualizing traits and abilities come to be socially esteemed. Such esteem gives rise to the relation to self called self-esteem or self-worth (Honneth 1995, 121-28).

What is crucial here, is the fact that for Honneth, the three spheres of recognition can be seen as developmental stages for which each successive stage can only be achieved once an individual has developed the previous relation to self. Without the basic self-confidence to express one's needs and emotions as acquired through the mode of recognition called love, it is impossible to engage in the intersubjective relations necessary for legal recognition (Honneth 1992, 107). Without the self-respect and existence of a political community that arise from legal recognition, there would be no conception of the shared projects or values in communities that are a necessary condition for attaining social esteem (Honneth, 1992 p. 122).

## 2. The Nature of Morality

As indicated in the introduction, this essay is not concerned with the normative arguments for Taylor's two principles of political recognition or the ethics of Honneth's three spheres of recognition, but rather with the metaethical presuppositions of these positions. That is, it does not ask whether either Taylor or Honneth is 'right', morally speaking, but it asks how we should interpret the meaning of their moral commitments, what their metaphysical status is and to what extent the truth of such commitments exists objectively (Miller 2013). In what follows, I explicate these questions and provide a quick overview of the main positions in contemporary metaethics. After this, I engage in a closer reading of the works summarized above and see if we can make the metaethical presuppositions of Taylor and Honneth explicit. In the next chapter, I evaluate to what extent this has any argumentative significance and what this metaethical background means for the practical application for either theory of recognition.

One of the most important problems in both classical and contemporary metaethics is a semantic one, which asks what it is exactly that moral judgments express (Miller 2013). Specifically, this question is concerned with whether or not the psychological state that is expressed in a moral judgment is a belief or an emotion. If, as cognitivists hold, moral judgments are in the business of expressing beliefs, then this implies that such judgments have a truth value: the belief expressed in a judgment is either true or false. Non-cognitivism, in contrast, holds that moral judgments express non-cognitive mental states such as desires or feelings of (dis)approval, and that morality therefore falls outside of the domain of questions about truth altogether (van Roojen 2018). Another important question within the metaethical debate is whether or not moral propositions, provided that these propositions do in fact have a truth value, refer to mind-independent factors. Moral realism holds that this is in fact the case, and that the truth or falsity of any moral proposition or judgment therefore exists objectively. The term moral irrealism is used to designate both cognitivist and non-cognitivist positions that do not hold the thesis that ethical propositions refer to mind-independent facts (Väyrynen 2005). Finally, within moral realism we may distinguish between naturalist and non-naturalist theories, which

disagree about the nature of the mind-independent facts that make moral propositions true or false. As the names suggest, naturalists hold that such facts are 'natural' and can be described by the natural sciences or psychology, and non-naturalists deny this (Moore 1903, 40). Though this is only a rough sketch that is by no means meant to be comprehensive, it does highlight the most important questions that I mean to subject Taylor's and Honneth's theories to and provides some possible answers to these questions.

## 2.1 Charles Taylor's Moral realism.

As we have seen in chapter 1, Taylor sees the set of moral propositions with which we identify ourselves as constituting our identity and believes that this process of identification is a fundamentally dialogical and dynamic process. On its own, this description tells us very little about the nature of these moral propositions themselves, and in his own work Taylor never explicitly identifies himself with any of the positions described above. Despite this fact, I will argue here that *Sources of the Self* (1989) clearly reveals Taylor's position to be one of moral realism, and therefore marks him as a cognitivist as well. We can establish this categorization by testing Taylor's thinking to the following three theses, all of which have to be fulfilled in order to classify a position as being realist (Väyrynen 2005).

1. Moral predicates refer to moral properties and represent moral facts. This is called the semantic thesis, which we can also conceptualize as a cognitivist thesis. Note that this thesis says something about the meaning or semantic function of moral predicates but does not commit us to say anything about the reality of the moral facts to which moral predicates refer.
2. At least some moral judgments are true. This is the alethic thesis, which eliminates cognitivist alternatives such as John Mackie's (1977) error theory to which I will return shortly.
3. Moral judgments are true if and only if their objects of assessment possess some relevant moral qualities, and these qualities are metaphysically robust, that is, they are not metaphysically different from or inferior to non-moral qualities. This last thesis is an ontological one, as it seeks to tell us something about the actual nature of moral facts or qualities.

At first sight Taylor's theory, and especially its emphasis on the dialogical, socially constructed nature of our horizons of significance seems to hint at subjectivism. If what we take to be morally true is dependent on our contingent interactions with other people, then those moral beliefs are themselves contingent, and any truth in such beliefs must then be grounded upon the simple fact that people hold those beliefs. In *The Politics of Recognition* (PER) however, Taylor calls subjectivist theories 'confused' and 'half-baked' and rejects them on the basis of a simple argument that makes his position on (1) very clear (Taylor 1992, 69). If moral judgments are concerned not with expressing truth, but with expressing feelings of (dis)liking something, then the difference between actually finding a culture worthy and expressing your solidarity with that culture despite the fact that you do not find that culture's achievements to have worth falls away. In other words, if my judgment 'this culture has value' expresses merely my positive feeling towards this culture, then no actual value is recognized to exist in this culture despite my positive valuation of it. Since we interpret such valuations as being condescending rather than as true expressions of respect, moral expressions must be aimed at truth, must aim to say something about the actual moral status of something rather than express a subjective feeling (Taylor 1992, 69-70). Though this is not what we generally mean with the term 'subjectivism' in metaethics, the argument does allow us to conclude that Taylor supports (1) and can therefore

be classified as a cognitivist about morality.

Saying that our moral language aims at moral truth tells us something about the meaning of moral statements, which is why Väyrynen (2005) dubbed the previous thesis the semantic thesis. But the fact that moral statements refer to moral properties and are supposed to represent moral truth does not mean that such moral facts actually exist or that we have any access to moral truth; the truth of (1) implies nothing about the truth of (2). That it is possible to support (1) without supporting (2) becomes clear from John Mackie's (1977) error theory, which holds that though humans *aim* to describe actually existing moral qualities in the world, they continuously and consistently fail at this project. In order to clarify Taylor's position on (2) then, we need to know to what extent he believes that moral propositions have a truth value or ἀλήθεια (alethia), and to what extent humans have access to this truth value and are able to form true moral judgments. In order to arrive at this point, Taylor distinguishes between the affective and ontological dimensions of a moral judgment. Proclaiming that humans are worthy of respect, for instance, involves not only an affective claim (the claim that I have a strong feeling about the inherent worth of humans) but also an assent to the ontological claim that it is a moral fact about humans that they are worthy of respect (Taylor 1989, 5-6). The relevance of this second, ontological claim has been discredited in contemporary thought because of what Taylor calls the naturalist tendency to reduce the phenomenological experience of morality down to sociobiological (natural) explanations, a point to which he keeps returning in his later works (Taylor 1991, 74). Such a 'natural reduction' of the ontological claims in moral judgments fails to recognize a fundamental difference between our deeply rooted moral reactions and other types of natural reactions, such as our (un)pleasant reactions towards certain smells or tastes. In our moral - unlike our other reactions - we acknowledge that it is some internal aspect of the object to which we react those merits or validates our moral reaction. It is because of this object-validation that we want our moral judgment to be consistent, since questions of consistency only arise when we consider properties that are independent of our de facto instinctive reactions (Taylor 1989, 6-7). Moral argument and reasoning always presuppose the existence of such ontological moral claims, which is why we can never properly consider morality from the perspective of the natural sciences (Hume's famous 'no ought from an is' principle). Instead of concluding from this, as 'the naturalists' do, that moral ontology has no basis in fact, Taylor claims that we should take the strong phenomenological experience of a moral ontology seriously as indicating our access to actual moral truths.

“We should treat our deepest moral instincts, our ineradicable sense that human life is to be respected, as our mode of access to the world in which ontological claims are discernible and can be rationally argued about and sifted” (Taylor 1989 p.8).

Despite the fact that this moral world, or 'the good' is something independent from us, we do have access to it: we grapple with it and make it our own and can therefore logically be correct in our moral judgments. Since this argument shows that Taylor believes in both the existence of moral truth and in the possibility of human beings having access to that truth, (2) must be valid for Taylor (Carkner 2006, 8).

In considering Taylor's stance on the semantic thesis and our access to the moral world, we have come very close to answering the third thesis of moral realism concerning the ontological status of moral facts. We have seen that it is crucial for Taylor that the truth of any moral judgment is determined not by our having that de facto judgment, but by some moral properties of the thing that we are judging itself. We have also seen that these moral properties are different from the properties described by natural science, indicating that if Taylor adheres to moral realism, it must be a form of non-naturalist realism. This conceptual gap between the natural sciences and the subject matter of ethics is by no means reason to declare morality to be non-objective or not real however, as such a declaration assumes without grounds that all aspects of reality can be described by the natural sciences (Taylor 1989, 57-58). The simple fact that we cannot escape using moral terms in our description of human life trumps any general metaphy-

sical or epistemological considerations about science, since such general consideration must be based upon what we find in the world and cannot serve as the basis for objecting against the reality of such findings. The moral world, despite not being explainable in physical terms, is just as real and objective as physics. Moral properties, in Taylor's conception, are therefore robust as demanded by (3), not because they are metaphysically the same as non-moral properties, but because their metaphysical status is not inferior or 'less real' as that of non-moral properties (Taylor 1989, 59; Abbey 2002, 95-98).

## 2.2 Honneth's Formal Conception of the Good

Honneth, unlike Taylor, embraces and incorporates the naturalist perspective in his theory of recognition, and even formulates this explicitly when discussing the limits of Hegel's early writings (Honneth 1992, 67). Honneth does away with what he considers the unfounded metaphysical assumptions of Hegel and seeks to replace them with a philosophy based on empirical, natural facts. This is why he invokes psychologists such as Mead, and why he considers his philosophy to be a social, rather than a moral or political philosophy (Zurn 2000, 118). Despite the gap between moral and scientific notions pointed out by Taylor in the previous section, Honneth claims that his explanation of the struggles of recognition can give rise to a 'formal conception of the ethical life', a normative standpoint that allows us to evaluate and compare different forms of social organization. How does Honneth arrive at this formal conception of the good, and what can we say about the metaethical status of this normative ideal in his work?

The ultimate normative goal, or ideal end-state in Honneth's work is complete self-realization - sometimes called 'personal integrity' (Honneth 1992, 175) -, conceived of in terms of Kantian autonomy, the capacity to prescribe oneself a moral law. In order to broaden the Kantian notion of individual autonomy and overcome its focus on merely cognitive capacities however, Honneth articulates the structural aspects of a good or ethical life and the motivations for acting ethically (Honneth 1992, 172-175; Zurn 2000, 118-119). This is where love, legal relations and social esteem come in, the three patterns of recognition discussed in chapter 1. In order to form a positive attitude towards oneself, a person must first successfully engage in all three spheres of recognition (love, respect, esteem) so that that person develops self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem in that order (Honneth 1992, 169). Engagement in all three spheres of recognition is thus the necessary condition for attaining the good in life, and a life that fulfills this condition is called the ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*] (Honneth 1992, 173). With this formal conception of the ethical life in mind, we can evaluate particular struggles as either emancipatory and progressive or as oppressive and reactionary, depending on whether they contribute to or diminish the necessary conditions for attaining the good as specified above. Honneth's formal conception of the ethical life, and especially its third component of social esteem or solidarity seems to leave room for quite a large amount of normative practices and ideals. Solidarity, as we have seen, arises when subjects mutually recognize each other's valuable contributions to some shared goal within what is called a community of value. At first sight, this seems to suggest that any specific value or goal that has the capacity of providing the basic value of a community can thereby contribute to the ethical life. Indeed, the only limits that Honneth sets for such specific normative ideals is the formal objection that such ideals may never conflict with subjects' successful engagement in the other spheres of recognition (Honneth 1992, 178). As such, Honneth claims to refrain from formulating any concrete set of substantive universal values other than the autonomy gained in the ethical life.

Much like Taylor, the freedom that Honneth allows for people to form their own communities of value seems to suggest an elementary form of subjectivism or constructivism about values. The formal limits that Honneth sets to such values however, combined with the fact that this freedom is a normative goal in and of itself clearly show that for Honneth, it is possible for a person to be wrong in their moral judgments. The moral judgment that two women are not allowed to love each other for instance hinders some subjects' ability to gain the self-confiden-

ce associated with the recognition that one derives from love, and therefore takes society as a whole further away from attaining the good. As such, we can say that this position is morally wrong, fulfilling the semantic thesis (1) of moral realism. This same example also clarifies Honneth's position on the alethic thesis (2), since the inverse moral judgment (two women who love each other should be allowed to do so) contributes to the possibility of some people to fulfil the first sphere of recognition, and thereby brings society closer to the good life, making this moral judgment ethically true. Having established that Honneth is a cognitivist (thesis 1) who believes that moral propositions can be true (thesis 2), or, in other words, that there exists a moral domain or world to which humans have at least some amount of access, we are left to consider thesis (3) concerning the ontological status of those conditions that make a moral proposition true or false. As the self-realized autonomous life and its necessary intersubjective conditions constitute the only yardstick that Honneth provides for the normative evaluation of particulars, it is the ontological status of the good in this good life that we are concerned with here.

The key to understanding what it is exactly that justifies Honneth in claiming that his formal conception of the good life is the right one can be found in his 2003 exchange with Nancy Fraser, where he clearly formulates that his normative goal of the good life is valid because it mirrors the expectations of socially integrated subjects (Fraser and Honneth 2003,174). That is, the demand for being properly recognized and attaining the resulting practical relation to self of living a self-realized autonomous life expresses an emancipatory interest of the human race, and for this reason Honneth feels justified in proclaiming the fulfilment of this demand as the good life. It seems then that the ultimate moral grounding on which Honneth builds his normative ideal is a psychological property of human beings engaged in social struggles. As the ontological status of psychological properties is by no means metaphysically more mysterious than or inferior to that of non-moral properties, we can safely say that Honneth's theory satisfies (3). As the psychological falls within Moore's (1903) classification of the natural, we may distinguish Honneth's metaethical framework as falling under the banner of natural moral realism.

### 3. Reflection of Meta-ethical Perspectives Upon Recognition Theory.

Taylor warns us multiple times that adopting a politics of equal recognition can lead us to believe that we are giving everyone equal or neutral treatment, while in actuality we are applying a particular western normative model on people(s) who do not identify with this model (Taylor 1992,43). This is why a politics of difference is introduced, so that we don't homogenize a heterogeneous humanity under western liberalism, dressed up as 'neutrality'. We should aim to recognize people for those things that individuate them, to respect them on their own grounds. As we have seen however, Taylor holds some qualities or attributes to be objectively better than others, irrespective of how individual people or entire cultures evaluate or value these qualities or attributes. Concretely, this means that while identity development is universally dependent on mutual recognition of moral identifications, some of these identifications, be they recognized by others or not, are fundamentally wrong.

This creates a problem for the politics of difference, a problem of which Taylor is acutely aware. We cannot simply recognize every person or culture for their individuating properties if there exists a logical possibility for those properties to be morally wrong. In addition to this cognitive difficulty with applying a politics of difference, Taylor holds that we are unable to respect people based on their difference alone (Taylor 1992,69-70). In judging the ethical standards of other cultures, we always rely on our own horizons of significance, which means that we end up categorizing and judging these cultures' value systems from our own perspectives, leaving us unable to truly judge their worth (Taylor 1992,71). In order to solve this problem, Taylor proposes that we adopt Gadamer's idea of a fusion of horizons - *Horizontverschmelzung* - (Gadamer 1998,313). By comparing and fusing our own horizons of significance with those of other cultures or people, we create a new, broader horizon that provides us with a new vocabulary for comparison. This allows us to compare the relative worth of other cultures in a way

that doesn't prioritize our own standards, and to genuinely recognize any worth or value that we might find in these other cultures (Taylor 1992,67). Though the method of fused horizons solves the problem of comparing different value systems, it does not by itself guarantee that we will in fact find anything of value in a certain culture's value system.

If we suppose, as Taylor does, that there exists a moral truth to which people have some amount of access, but that is independent of their will, we are left with two options concerning the truth of various cultures' ethical beliefs. 1) Every person or culture has an equal access to the moral truth, and all cultural differences between various horizons of significance are ultimately reducible to this moral truth. The differences between various horizons can then be explained as different interpretations of the same truth, or as arising from cultures having different non-moral beliefs about the world. 2) There exists genuine disagreement about moral truth among different cultures and people, and these disagreements are not reducible to different interpretations of some universally held belief. This second thesis is called descriptive moral relativism (DMR), and in combination with Taylor's moral realism it implies that at least some of these cultures are simply dead wrong in their ethical beliefs.

Suppose (1) is true (and DMR is therefore false). If we fuse our horizons with those of other cultures, we will then always find that ultimately, both horizons rely on the same (morally true) ethical beliefs, and that our previous horizons simply did not allow us to see this agreement because of the particular way that both cultures expressed these ethical beliefs. If this is the case however, we come to recognize and respect these cultures not for their individuality, but for believing in the same morally true notions that we do. Though our own understanding of this moral truth might be expanded or altered slightly because we fused our horizons, our assumed moral realism implies that any such changes to our conception of the moral truth can never be substantive or fundamental. We have therefore returned to a politics of equal recognition, in which our respect for other people is based upon their moral similarity to ourselves. If the DMR expressed in (2) is true however, we will inevitably find that despite the fact that we have fused our horizons of significance with those of other cultures, the valuations of some cultures simply lack the moral truth that our valuations do in fact possess. If we find no genuine worth or value in such cultures, we both can't and do not have to recognize the identities based upon the horizons of significance of these cultures. We will surely find worth in the valuations of some cultures, but only to the extent that these valuations are based upon the actual moral truth. Taylor's politics of difference thus remains empty: it is not based on true difference at all. Rather we only recognize those "differences" that are not real differences, but merely different expressions of the same moral truth. This is a direct consequence of the moral realism that Taylor implicitly holds true. Regardless of whether DMR is true or not, Taylor's insistence on moral realism reduces his politics of difference to a politics of equal recognition.

Honneth, in contrast to Taylor, does not ask us to recognize people from other backgrounds for what individuates them. His conception of solidarity or social esteem, as we have seen in chapter 1, only takes place between the members of a certain community of value themselves, as these members already share a common conception of the good. As long as a culture's shared goal does not interfere with Honneth's formal conception of the good, it does not matter if different societies recognize each other for their individuating properties. The natural realist status of this formal conception of the good in Honneth's work however raises some questions of in and of itself.

As we have seen in chapters 1 and 2, Honneth aims to ground his theory of recognition upon purely naturalist premises. Both the process of how specific forms of recognition give rise to their corresponding practical relations to self and the inherent human interest in self-realization are explained as psychological facts about humankind. Now, for something that is to serve as the naturalist or descriptive basis on which his entire normative project is to be grounded, Honneth does remarkably little to show us that the deep-seated demand for recognition and the internal logic of his three stages of recognition are indeed universally shared psychological properties of human beings. In *Redistribution or Recognition* (2003), where Honneth aims to show contra Fraser that historically all social struggles have a basis in identity recognition, the only

concrete evidence that is presented for this claim consists of a specific, limited set of (western) historical studies (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 131-133). Furthermore, Honneth claims that since empirical studies of the actual reactions of people engaged in social struggles are informed by theoretical pre-understandings, we can only determine the necessary concepts involved in social struggles by conceptual analysis (Fraser and Honneth 2003, 126-127). Though the moral realism that Honneth espouses is thus understood as resulting from natural facts, the actual proof of these natural facts remains limited.

As Honneth's theory only seems to prescribe interpersonal and intercultural recognition and says nothing about the recognition that we owe to people from entirely different cultural traditions, it would be unjust to classify his position as one falling in Taylor's conception of a politics of equal recognition. As he holds all social struggles to be based on demands for recognition however, in line with his natural moral realism, we can formulate a critique that is very similar to Taylor's critique on PER. In classifying all social struggles as emanating from an inherent demand for recognition, Honneth is essentially homogenizing the entire human population and reducing their struggles down to a call for a particular form of self-realization. As we may very reasonably doubt the universality of both this specific Hegelian form of self-realization and the demand for a recognition in terms of self-realization in general (Zurn 2003), such a homogenization may lead to the same forms of misrecognition already described by de Beauvoir (1949). There are many conceptions of the good life, and Honneth's formal one may simply reflect the hegemonic western tradition that he comes from himself.

Both Taylor and Honneth, as we have seen here, adhere to particular forms of moral realism that, when consistently applied, elucidate some interesting and potentially problematic aspects of their theories. Where both theories are meant as emancipatory projects, the insistence on a single objective moral truth seems to thwart this goal. For Taylor the tension between moral realism and his ideal of a politics of difference manifests itself in the fact that genuine respect and recognition, within the framework of his moral realism, can only exist when subjects' moral horizons are shared to some extent, making a genuine politics of difference impossible. For Honneth, the derivation of moral standards from a supposed universal psychological demand for particular forms of recognition makes him vulnerable to Taylor's critique of the particularity of politics of equal recognition.

#### 4. Conclusion

By applying Väyrynen's three theses of moral realism to both Taylor's and Honneth's recognition theories, I have argued that these writers implicitly adhere to non-natural and natural moral realism respectively. Such an adherence to moral realism, I have argued in chapter 3, forces both writers in the position where they either have to admit that some people(s) are not worthy of the recognition that they argue for or ascribe universal properties to heterogeneous groups of people. This last option is criticized by Taylor among others as unjustly homogenizing and reflective of a hegemonic worldview, and therefore leads to the misrecognition and unjust categorization of already suppressed minority groups.

As both Taylor and Honneth explicitly state that they want to avoid prescribing universal values to various cultures for emancipatory reasons, it seems that the moral realism they espouse is problematic for their recognition theories. I propose that further research in recognition theory should therefore be acutely aware of its metaethical presuppositions if it is to avoid the pitfalls I have described in this paper. If recognition theorists aim to keep their moral realism, it seems, there are three options of achieving this. (1) Provide some empirical basis for the claim that there are in fact universal moral beliefs or demands. If this can be shown, the accusation of unjust homogenization would lose its appeal. (2) Admit that under the current theory, some people are wrong in their ethical beliefs, and are therefore not owed recognition. This would mean that recognition loses its universalist appeal. (3) Formulate some form of value pluralism that explicitly allows contradictory value statements to be true at the same time. The only other path for Taylor's and Honneth's theories of recognition, if they are to fulfil the emancipatory promise they make, would be to base their theories on a form of either cognitive irrationalism or moral relativism.

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## Does Recognition Entail Epistemic Injustice?

Rodney Ramdas

*This paper examines recognition theory as to its epistemic presuppositions. Motivated by the inability to convincingly state the difference between recognition and ideological recognition, I argue that no such difference can be made unless the epistemic injustice present at the core of recognition is examined more critically. My contention is that the core mechanism of recognition favors the dominant and as such epistemically oppress the dominated. I show how the dominated deal with this. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon I agree that the dominated do not actually seek recognition by the dominator. In fact, their reluctance or even refusal to do so is another way of pointing out the epistemic injustice inherent in Hegelian-based social recognition.*

“There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict*, recognized the Negro slave.” (Fanon 2008, 169)

The Hegelian-based recognition approach agenda is to advance the idea that the moral and just basis of social interaction hinges upon the successful reciprocal recognition between people, collectives and institutions (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1996; Fraser 2000).<sup>1</sup> Recognition would require a struggle by the mis-recognized to be recognized (Honneth 1996) so illustrated at the start of G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) in which he describes the inaugural myth of recognition: the lord-bondship dialectic. This myth describes the willingness of one person (the master) to risk her fundamental freedom in a struggle for life or death, to *gain* recognition. What is presumably gained is the right to be considered the unambiguous, unchallengeable, and normative source for another person (Hegel 1977, 111–18). In short: to be treated as a free and equal person (Iser 2019). Theories that derive from this myth consider this mechanism of gaining recognition by struggle necessary to further moral progress towards more social justice. Non-violent examples of such struggles are for instance the work of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. “Just wars” are an example of struggles that include violence.

This paper deals with a problem that has been raised concerning the core tenet of the Hegelian-based recognition approach (Honneth 2007). This problem concerns the necessity to make a clear distinction between Hegelian recognition and ideological recognition, the former as we’ve seen, defined as a struggle-based liberation and equalization practice and the latter defined as a practice that subjugates and dominates people for the purpose of perpetuating a social status quo. The problem is that, according to Louis Althusser, the two kinds of recognition are indistinguishable from one another (Althusser 2014; Honneth 2007). Given the agenda of the original Hegelian-based recognition approach, it is crucial that this is not the case. If Althusser is right, then the foremost Hegelian-based recognition thinker Honneth has to admit that: “recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system” (Honneth 2007, 323). In short, *recognition would subject, rather than respect*, the latter being an important cornerstone of Honneth’s recognition approach (Honneth 1996). Hereafter, when speaking of recognition, I mean Hegelian-based recognition and when I speak of ideological recognition, I mean the Althusserian kind.

Honneth considers an act of recognition to be a promise. A promise could be that if I act according to what would make me be recognized, then I will receive a certain social reward, for instance to be socially included. Honneth refers to the fulfillment of the obligation the promise entails as “material fulfillment”. His claim is that ideological recognition never makes good on such promises while proper Hegelian recognition does. An act of recognition is non-ideological when it convincingly and beneficially makes good on the promise it entails. If it does not, then it is a case of ideological recognition (Honneth 2007).

1 See (Iser 2019) for an introductory overview.

Honneth's reasoning is as follows. Recognition requires what he calls a moderate form of value realism which postulates that one can perceive really existing morally correct qualities, that is, virtues of another person or group to which we respond rationally (Honneth 2002, 255). They are really existing in what Honneth calls the lifeworld, a pre-given context into which we are socialized. Moral qualities can only be recognized from within this lifeworld (Honneth 2002, 255). Honneth adds a moderation proviso: he assumes that the rational evaluation is dependent upon our level of integration into the lifeworld (Honneth 2007, 336). Call this the value realism claim.

Hegel famously stated that "what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (Hegel 1991, 20). This idea of the tautological relation between rationality and actuality is echoed in Honneth's value realism: what is recognized is rational and what is rational is recognized. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, most recognitional encounters in the lifeworld cannot be credible as ideological forms of recognition: they would not have been part of the lifeworld in the first place had they been irrational. What is irrational cannot be recognized and made part of the lifeworld.

Closely related to this recognitional rationality is reasonability. What is needed is a way to evaluate acts of recognition as to their reasonability in the sense that a recognizer should be able to articulate the reasons the recognition is morally correct. Honneth does readily admit that there clearly is irrationality and unreasonability to be found in the world (Honneth 2007).

He therefore specifies further and suggests that ideological recognition is irrational because it fails to materially fulfill an evaluative promise. This kind of recognition is still value realistic given its definition, but it is not justified because unlike true recognition, the act of recognition explained as a promise (for instance, workplace autonomy is liberating) does not become fulfilled in a real sense (workers are still dominated). Call this the material fulfillment claim.

Motivated by the inability to convincingly state the difference between recognition and ideological recognition, I argue that no such difference can be made unless the epistemic injustice present at the core of recognition is examined more critically. My contention is that the core mechanism of recognition favors the dominant and as such epistemically oppress the dominated. I show how the dominated deal with this. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon I agree that the dominated do not actually seek recognition by the dominator. In fact, their reluctance or even refusal to do so is another way of pointing out the epistemic injustice inherent in Hegelian-based social recognition.

### 1. Is Value Realism's Historical Relativism Justified?

A value realist holds that value claims are sociologically constructed facts that really exist (Oddie 2013).<sup>2</sup> Value claims such as "our elders deserve our respect" are evaluative qualities or properties (*Werteigenschaften*) (Honneth 2007, 327–28) of these facts.<sup>3</sup> The totality of these facts makes up what Honneth calls the lifeworld.

Honneth adds a historical relativism proviso to the value realist's claim: facts are not only socially constructed, but they are also situated *historically* which we have to understand as meaning that there are values that were morally justified within their socio-historical context. By arguing this, Honneth aims to show that what could be construed as ideologically constructed recognition was actually justified social recognition of the Hegelian kind. I will argue contra Honneth that historical relativism does not save him from the Althusserian charge. In fact, it possibly aggravates it: it could *itself* be an act of ideological recognition.

Honneth argues for this position by giving three examples. the virtuous house slave Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher's novel (Beecher Stowe 2009), the "good" housewife and mother of the 1950's

<sup>2</sup> Value realism is often conflated with moral realism. The difference is that value realism is about the axiological domain (good, bad, better, worse) while moral realism is about the deontic domain (permissibility, impermissibility, obligation etc.) See (Oddie 2013) and (Honneth 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Value realism can take a propositional form which is called cognitivism or a non-propositional form. The latter can be nihilistic, that is, that value terms are considered meaningless, or they can be linked to a positive account of the acceptability of the claim made. I take Honneth to be of the latter kind thus "elder respect is good" is non-propositional and contingent on the positive act of recognition. See (Oddie 2013, 2).

and finally the heroic veteran soldier. Honneth asks whether it is not justified that Uncle Tom enjoys his self-esteem, that he is right to be proud of his ability to please his white master. After all, it is an expression of the slave's self-worth. Similarly, doesn't the public esteem enjoyed by the good housewife as a caring mother compensate for the disrespect the stereotype entails, to be excluded from other work outside the home? And isn't it justified that the self-esteem male heroism provides to veterans of war who otherwise lack employment as a source of prestige and reputation?

According to Honneth: "In each [of the three examples], these possibilities of interpretation give us a clear sense of the fact that upon closer inspection of the historical circumstances, a particular *dispositive* of esteem that we hold in retrospect to be pure ideology can prove in fact to be a condition for a group-specific attainment of increased self-worth" (Honneth 2007, 327). In other words, Honneth assumes that because the examples of stereotypes provide self-worth, self-respect, or self-esteem these stereotypical acts of recognition are justified and therefore not ideological. How then does a society arrive at the obvious conclusion that women are not just "good housewives" or that there is no such thing as virtuous slavery? When those concerned revolt. Then and only then, according to Honneth, is recognition no longer a positive affirmation of behavioral expectations, only then is it unmasked as a practice of domination whose mechanism was ideological recognition (Honneth 2007, 327).

This line of reasoning is contradictory. Why do women or black people revolt? Because their social and historical circumstances demand it. But Honneth would have us believe no such demand existed prior to the revolt, but rather that the moral situation for women and black people was perfectly fine since these groups experienced "increased self-worth" given the values present in the lifeworld (Honneth 2007, 327). *Incipit contradictio*.

Honneth's value realism itself is on shaky grounds. Like its sister-concept *moral realism* it seems to suggest that *is* implies *ought*.<sup>4</sup> Honneth's historical relativism aggravates the situation: all existing wrongs are always justified given their socio-historical context and the apparent capacity of humans to distill self-worth/esteem/respect, we need only to apply the proviso.

## 2. Is Recognition Applying Epistemic Power to Dominate?

Honneth's value realism is at odds with epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), a concept that is concerned with credibility or prejudice as a judgement bestowed upon a knower by a hearer that the hearer exploits via agential or structural identity power.<sup>5</sup> In the current section, I argue that recognition applies these powers which connect recognition to epistemic injustice. I do not mean to suggest that recognition and epistemic injustice are incompatible. Fricker and others<sup>6</sup> show various ways of marrying the two theories. I find the combination unattractive because of the underlying problems with value realism as I have shown in the previous section.

To illustrate the epistemic nature of recognition I will borrow Honneth's example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The opening of Beecher Stowe's book illustrates a case of epistemic injustice. Two gentlemen, as Beecher Stowe takes care to introduce them, are negotiating the trade of slave Tom. Tom's master, Mr. Shelby, confides to slave trader Mr. Haley, that Tom (never *Mr. Tom*) runs his farm and is trustworthy, something which would surely increase the price Haley is willing to pay for Tom. But Haley is incredulous. Slaves are merchandise and no amount of Christianity obtained by the slave will change his mind. Mr. Shelby is adamant Tom "really *did* get it", referring to Tom's religion. He retells that when he sent Tom off on an errand with a large sum of money he said to Tom: "I trust you, because I think you're a Christian - I know you would n't [*sic*] cheat" (Beecher Stowe 2009, 48).

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4 See Jip Maat's essay in this volume.

5 I am following the "knower-hearer" terminology of the founder of the theory of epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2007). It might seem counterintuitive that the knower is in a position of disadvantage. It helps to realize that it is only the hearer that can grant understanding and thus credibility to the knower. It is the task of the knower to show she knows. In our present discussion the knower therefore corresponds to the recognizee and the hearer with the recognizer.

6 See (McConkey 2004; Congdon 2018; Fricker 2018; Giladi 2018)

Tom is not considered a credible, knowledgeable person other than being considered so for the purpose of the trade between Shelby and Haley. Tom's capability to run the farm makes no real difference as to Tom's personhood. Even his Christianity is nothing more than an extra attribute that does not necessarily make Tom more valuable as merchandise. It does not enhance his credibility per se, testimony of which we find in Mr. Shelby's affirmation that he believes Tom will not disenfranchise him because he thinks Tom is a Christian. Mr. Shelby establishes Tom's trustworthiness, not his Christianity.

The social power, the power to grant credibility, is with Mr. Shelby, and not with Tom. The hearer holds a particular kind of social power over the knower which is defined as "a practically socially situated capacity to control other's actions, where this capacity may be exercised [...] by particular social agents, or alternatively it may be exercised structurally" (Fricker 2007, 13). A specific kind of social power is identity power: a power dependent upon "shared imaginative conceptions of social identity" (Fricker 2007, 13). Fricker distinguishes between two kinds of epistemic injustice that uses identity power to control people. The first kind, *testimonial injustice*, occurs when a person is done harm in her capacity as a knower when identity power is at work to her disadvantage. This is normally the effect of an identity-prejudicial stereotype. Tom is not credible as a competent farm manager, because his identity is determined by an agent, Mr. Haley for instance, using the identity power just mentioned. Another way of saying this is that the agent Mr. Haley is not recognizing Tom by epistemically oppressing Tom. When he "got religion" (Beecher Stowe 2009, 48), he was still not credible enough. His Christianity did not matter in issues of credibility. In short, Tom is not recognized as a person. It is necessary that Tom's credibility is deflated on account of the fidelity to moderate value realism. The lifeworld has not yet sufficiently absorbed the idea that black people are people and should be heard credibly.

The second kind of epistemic injustice Fricker distinguishes is *hermeneutical injustice* and it is suffered when identity power is wielded in a structural manner via prejudices and stereotypes. It is therefore not agential but present in ubiquitous discursive practices. This kind of epistemic injustice is based on a hermeneutic inequality: the social situation is such that a person is unable to articulate her social experience because there is an interpretative gap between her ability to articulate her situation and the collective resources available to her to comprehensively enunciate that situation (Fricker 2007, 148–75). The only way to talk about her social experiences is by using the discourse of the oppressor. That discourse is likely not to have the means, or otherwise does not allow her to express her social situation. The canonical example is suffering from sexual harassment in a society that lacks such a concept (Fricker 2007, 149–52) or suffering the feeling of insignificance in a world that lacks #blacklivesmatter or #metoo.

Fricker also considers hermeneutical injustice to be structural because it is based on identity stereotyping and prejudices. Frantz Fanon (Fanon 2008) gives an example to illustrate this point, referring to white priests discussing how to address blacks: "Oh the blacks. They must be spoken to kindly; talk to them about their country; it's all in *knowing* how to talk to them" (Fanon 2008, 15, *emph. added*). How to talk involves talking "like an adult with a child [...] smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening" (Fanon 2008, 19). Tom is confronted with structural, hermeneutic injustice as well in this way, wherever he turns, in a very subtle way made clear by Beecher Stowe already in the opening of her book: it's always Tom, never *Mr. Tom*. She takes care to make sure the reader understands this when introducing Mr. Shelby and Mr. Haley, *gentlemen*. Another, well-known example of a discursive practice that is an instance of hermeneutic injustice is the racist use of the word *boy* to address an adult African American, apparently still common (Achtenberg 2006; Bennett-Alexander 2010).

### 3. Do the Dominated Seek Epistemic Recognition?

How does epistemic injustice come about in recognition? How do testimonial and hermeneutic injustice relate to the act of recognition? To show both kinds of epistemic injustice are inherent in recognition, I briefly re-examine recognition's Hegelian roots. As we saw before, Hegel's lordship-bondage dialectic plays out as a struggle for life or death, to attain recognition (Hegel 1977, 111–18). The victor of the struggle for recognition becomes the dominator, allowing the other to live, cancelling the other-being (*Anderssein*) (Hegel 1977, 141–42) and thereby unilaterally recognizing the other. But this victory comes at the price of not being recognized herself. After all, the slave has not genuinely recognized the

dominator. She is only coercively recognizing. She is only *pseudo*-recognizing.

Political republicanist philosopher Frank Lovett's investigation into domination observes that the resolution of the master-slave encounter is that "domination turns out to be self-defeating" (Lovett 2010, 136). Even worse, the slave is now not even considered a competent judge of recognition, because her misjudgment - not genuinely recognizing the dominator - has cost her autonomy, her freedom. She is now condemned: "to be a 'mere' slave who does not count as an autonomous and competent judge" (Iser 2019). Credibility is therefore decided by the dominator. Epistemic judgement in the form of a credibility assessment is at the core of recognition. The dominator gets to determine the credibility of the dominated by virtue of being the normative source which was after all what was at stake in the struggle from the start.

While pseudo-recognizing the dominator, the slave is looking for self-recognition which is alluded to by the continuation of the epigraph of this paper when Frantz Fanon writes: "But the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*" (Fanon 2008, 169). She does not seek recognition by the dominator which would not only be based on testimonial injustice since it is the dominator who determines credibility. At the same time, given the value realism required by recognition, the slave suffers from hermeneutic injustice: what is recognized is actual, and what is actual is recognized. And there is no way out. Being recognized is rather unattractive to the slave. She would have to conform to and perpetuate a stereotype. She would be captured in ideological recognition.

The refusal, be it conscious or unconscious, to struggle for recognition is exemplified in what political scientist James C. Scott (Scott 2008) calls *infrapolitics*, a resistance strategy by the oppressed versus their dominator that is purposefully hidden, made unknown, made *unrecognizable* to the latter, via what Scott calls hidden transcripts. These transcripts are defined as "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 2008, xii) while the dominant does the same. Scott then compares the two hidden transcripts to understand the resistance to domination. It's instructive to consider one such transcriptive practice in relation to what Fricker calls epistemic contribution: "a loosely unified social epistemic capability on the part of the individual to *contribute to the pool of shared epistemic materials* - materials for knowledge, understanding, and very often for practical deliberation" (Fricker 2015, 76, *emph. retained*).<sup>7</sup> I will consider graffiti as one such epistemic material as well as an example of a hidden resistance transcript.

Graffiti practitioners, writers or graffers as they refer to themselves, use the public space to express themselves through graffiti and tagging, the latter being a practice of leaving one's name in calligraphy, preferably in highly public yet hard to access places. The prevailing sentiment graffers express is that the practice provides them with respect. Myra Frances Taylor (Cottman, Marais, and Frances Taylor 2012; Frances Taylor 2012) diligently catalogued the sentiment and observed that the act of recognition is a two-step process. First step is to gain recognition by the widespread placement of one's tag, one's "ego-footprint" (Frances Taylor 2012, 61). The second step is to make sure it is in a daring place. Various types of recognition are granted: style recognition, street recognition, reputation recognition and likewise respect (self-respect, peer respect, community respect, universal respect is gained. All of which adds up to credibility: "street creds").

At the outset, graffiti seems to defy Scott's definition of *hidden* transcripts spectacularly since graffiti is rather public. But is it? There are two hidden transcripts related to graffiti. A public one that has institutionalized graffiti as "street art", as a mural expression of a legitimate artistic, cultural nature. Hence cities commission graffiti, creating the literal public transcript for all to see on murals throughout the city. But at the same time, there is a hidden transcript by the dominant at work. One that recognizes uncommissioned graffiti as vandalism categorized as criminal and/or juvenile, i.e., "kids messing around" (Cottman, Marais, and Frances Taylor 2012).

The second aspect treats graffiti as an epistemic material: "materials for knowledge, understanding and very often practical deliberation" (Fricker 2015, 79). Earlier, we saw Fricker define the

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<sup>7</sup> Following Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, Fricker intends epistemic contribution to be regarded as a fundamental capability necessary for human flourishing. Having this capability curtailed because one is blocked from contributing, or when one's contribution suffers a credibility deficit (testimonial injustice), or when someone's contribution is marginalized (hermeneutical injustice), is detrimental to such flourishing (Fricker 2015, 78-80).

ability of a person to contribute to these materials as epistemic contribution. It is an essential part of attaining epistemic justice. The Honnethian idea is that the oppressed struggle for recognition so that the dominant accepts them into the lifeworld. In this way I could agree with graffiti as an expression of struggle. But that is not what empirical research shows. Graffiti artists do not spray to vandalize the public sphere. Sprayed on the walls of the city, hidden in plain sight their work is a transcript meant for their *own* recognition - Fanon's self-recognition - within their own subcultural context. In this manner graffiti is an expression of what Fricker calls a fundamental enunciation of a human capability, namely, to epistemically contribute. This must happen, because this is the only genuine way to voice one's social situation without suffering testimonial or hermeneutical injustice.

The dominator cannot understand graffiti unless it is "Banksyified", that is, it is made recognizable, presenting an imagery that fits the evaluative framework of the dominator. Balloons, little girls, monkeys, recognizable people etc., stir the dominator's imagination while the predominantly hip hop inspired graffiti identifies the graffers as vandals. Because graffiti is considered vandalism, unless you are Banksy and your work is part of the epistemic pool, the epistemic social powers that be, have crafted an ingenious way to counter graffiti. Namely by commissioning their *own* "graffiti". This measure exploits, ironically in my opinion, an unwritten law of the graffer that one does not deface graffiti (Nash 2013, 442). This plays into the hand of the dominator: vandalism is curbed. To my mind it is censorship and a tell-tale sign of epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014) because they are not allowed to contribute epistemically, they are curtailed in what Fricker calls the human capability of epistemic contribution.

#### 4. Conclusion

The spirit of new capitalism contains the idea that workers are "creative 'entrepreneurs' of their own labor" and self-management and autonomy is granted and expected (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). According to Honneth this spirit shows that there exists a kind of recognition that is irrational (Honneth 2007, 343). It is not irrational in the sense that the beliefs of these creative entrepreneurs within companies is somehow incongruent logically. Rather, it is irrational as to the "real expression to the actual value articulated" (Honneth 2007, 345), the value being that the workers are free and not dominated whereas in reality they are. To illustrate: workers enjoy autonomy, are self-managing and believe their working conditions are the result of their own decisions. But they are still dominated, because ultimately by employee-employer contract they remain at the mercy of their employer's will.

Ironically, this situation mirrors Uncle Tom's situation. Both worker and slave are considered to do nothing wrong by honoring their boss or master and in doing so they are doing something right, as in, they're increasing their sense of self-worth, a tell-tale sign of successful Honnethian recognition. But the promise of emancipation, the insistence of the spirit of new capitalism on the autonomy of the worker, is never materially fulfilled: the worker ultimately does not enjoy real autonomy but remains subject to her boss. Of course, this is not expressed as such by the bosses. The public transcript transcribes a discourse of freedom, emancipation, and entrepreneurship and not of profit seeking and efficiency. That latter discourse is hidden, transcribed only by the financial controllers, and only voiced in board rooms. I think Honneth is right that this is a kind of irrationalism. But to my mind this irrationality is ultimately not the result of ideological recognition, but as I have argued inherent to how recognition works. Workers do not have the epistemic access to the hidden transcripts of the dominant. They are blind to their own oppression because the dominant has morally categorized them as Kantian creative entrepreneurs: all things wrong are their own fault. Full self-autonomy means full responsibility. These values really exist in Honneth's lifeworld. Aspiring to them through acts of recognition is expected. And so, for the board room director's values. If anything, Honneth would have to admit, the lifeworld is corrupt and perverted. If that is so, why is it still a source of normativity?

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# The Discordant Narrative: An Analysis of the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’

Mala Dengkeng

The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is a historical canon that comprises the fifty most important items – *vensters* – of Dutch national history (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 34). These fifty items are a mix of chronologically ordered individuals, events, documents, and inventions that are taught to students from age 7-14 in primary and secondary schools. The direct reason for the formulation of the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ – which I will from now on refer to as the canon - was a report that was published by the Dutch Board of Education in 2005. This report concluded that knowledge of Dutch history and culture has severely declined in the Dutch population (Grever et al. 2006, 107). The canon was supposed to fill this knowledge lacuna by formulating the ‘valuable parts of our culture and history that we want to pass on to new generations through education’.<sup>1</sup> Next to its function in formal education, the canon is used throughout Dutch society. Cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums, are encouraged to work with the canon, and the canon has an elaborate website which is meant for ‘all people interested in Dutch culture and history’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science has made available 20.000 canon booklets to be handed out to individuals that have just acquired Dutch citizenship (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). Clearly, the canon is intended to be prominently present in Dutch society, as the main document that tells the Dutch story (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 12).

The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ exists among many other nationally centred historical narratives. The dominance of the nation-state in modern European historiographies is not coincidental. The professionalisation of the historical discipline coincided with processes of nationalisation in the period from 1750 onwards (Berger 2017). New nations recognised the potential of national history-writing for collective identity construction and hence historians were encouraged to make the nation the focal point of their research. Also, well before this period, locally and regionally centred historical narratives were already ubiquitous (Enenkel and Ottenheim 2017). In this sense, the Dutch canon is not a new phenomenon. The canon is not unique either; England, Spain, France, and the United States have similar nationally oriented history curricula, which are justified with arguments similar to those used in the Dutch case. (Létourneau 2017). It is clear that the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is part of a larger genre of historical narratives that take the nation as their focal point.

The canon was not unequivocally received. The criticisms of the canon are as widespread as its use. Criticism has come from the public, academia, and history teachers and has targeted the content, the form, and the intention of the canon, as well as the political decision that lies behind its formulation. Upon these criticisms, the canon was revised, and a new version was presented in the summer of 2020. The main aim of the revision was to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of ‘stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society’, as well as to pay more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020). The revision consisted of the substitution of some, and a rewriting of all of the items (Funnekotter 2020). The form of the canon was not changed. The canon still consists of chronologically ordered events that tell the history of the Netherlands from the Dutch perspective, starting with a description of its first inhabitants and ending with a description of its present ones.

Paul Ricoeur, who has extensively written on (historical) narration, describes a diffe-

<sup>1</sup> This quote was translated from Dutch. The original quote was the following: ‘die waardevolle onderdelen van onze cultuur en geschiedenis die we via het onderwijs aan nieuwe generaties willen meegeven’. (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006)

rence between a course of events and the telling of these events. Historical events, according to Ricoeur, are configured to have specific meanings in an overarching narrative. This process of configuration is also termed *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1984, 66). For Ricoeur, there exists a loop of narrative interpretation, akin to the hermeneutic circle, in which the whole influences the parts that make up this whole (Meretoja 2014). In historical narratives, meanings can be assigned to events explicitly, as for instance in cases when certain events are defined as ‘breaks’ or ‘turning points’. However, meaning is also assigned implicitly. Narrative interpretation does not happen in a vacuum, rather it is influenced by implicit *models of sense-making* that are specific to our temporal and cultural situatedness. As Ricoeur states: ‘The reader is pointed toward the sort of figure that likens the narrated events to a narrative form that our culture has made us familiar with.’ (Ricoeur 1988, 153). These implicit *models of sense-making* thus function as *narrative templates* that all participate in what is termed a *cultural memory* (Dessingué 2017). One component that is prevalent in the cultural memory of western societies is the idea of coherence or unity (Maan 2015). Indeed, characters in stories are often expected to behave in a coherent or consistent manner. Characters can of course act in ways that do not conform to this expected coherence, but these actions will then be interpreted *as deviations* (Maan 2015).

In this essay, I will use Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory to analyse the implications that narrative elements have on the ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ and its ambition to do justice to the plurality of the Dutch past. In the first part of this paper, I will present Ricoeur’s narrative theory. I will explain how the meaning, function, and importance of (historical) events are influenced by their being put in an overarching narrative through the concepts of *prefiguration* and *configuration*. Then, I will show in more detail how this happens in the Canon of the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will briefly point out the main criticisms that were raised against the first version of the canon, after which I will describe, in general, the revisions that were made as a response to these criticisms. After the revision, many criticisms were not solved. Using Ricoeur’s narrative theory I will try to explain why this is the case. Lastly, I will critique the feasibility of the ambition of the Dutch government to formulate a national canon that will truly represent the plurality of the Dutch past.

## 1. Paul Ricoeur on Narration

In narrative theory, narration is generally defined as the practice of making sense of the world via storytelling. A story, defined as a description, either true or imagined, of a connected series of events, differs from a mere succession of events. By making a story out of a succession, meaningful connections between events are created, rendering them intelligible (Meretoja 2014). In a story, one event happens *because* of another, not merely *after* another.

Within narrative theory, two important views can be identified. In one view, narration is seen as a way by which humans confer meaning onto their experiences *retrospectively*. The idea is that human’s immediate or primary experiences are fundamentally chaotic and meaningless. Through narration, meaning and order is conferred onto these primary experiences, making them intelligible. However, by doing this narrative ultimately distorts reality. Since, through narration, *false* order and meaning is conferred onto a reality that is fundamentally chaotic and meaningless. Within this view narrative is evaluated both positively and negatively. On the one hand, it is emphasized that the process of narration is useful and necessary in making sense of the world. On the other hand, it is stressed that by doing this, narrative distorts reality.

Contrary to this view, the hermeneutic-phenomenological view states that humans always already observe the world in a meaningful way. The hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition states that all experience is characterized by interpretation and rejects the notion of immediate or primary chaotic experience devoid of interpretation. In this tradition, narrative and experience are not separated since they are thought to mutually influence each other. Human interpretations are influenced by existing narratives. The way we experience the world is therefore dependent on existing narratives. These narratives are in their turn influenced by

experience. In this sense, meaning and order are not imposed on experience through narrative retrospectively. Rather, the specific order and meaning our experiences already have, are influenced by narrative, which is in its turn influenced by experience. Consequently, the claim that narrative understanding inevitably distorts reality is rejected in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition.

Paul Ricoeur's analysis of narrative is part of the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. Hence, narrative is considered by Ricoeur to characterize the human way of experiencing and therefore the human way of being. For Ricoeur, this means that narrative is not only important due to its ubiquitous presence in the human world. Rather, narrative is considered to be constitutive of human existence, thereby becoming ontologically important. Ricoeur's analysis covers narration in its broad sense and describes how narrative is present in many spheres of human reality, from everyday reality to fiction and the telling of history.

### 1.1 Prefiguration and the Semantics of Action

Ricoeur describes that all human experience is characterized by culturally and historically mediated interpretation (Meretoja 2014). Humans, according to Ricoeur, are embedded in symbolic wholes that confer an initial readability to the world (Dowling 2011). This idea provides the grounds for Ricoeur's concept of *prefiguration*. Ricoeur describes that human in their daily lives understand each other through a *semantics of action* (Dowling 2011, 59). By this he means that humans understand each other's actions in terms of motives, intentions, and beliefs, thereby making these actions meaningful and hence readable. In this sense, single actions and events are bound together by a story. For example, if someone sees me on an early morning, walking at a slow pace and constantly yawning before entering a coffee shop to buy a large cup of coffee, she will probably interpret my actions the following way: 'It is still early, so she is tired and craving a cup of coffee that will wake her up a bit before her working day starts.' In the example, the observer makes sense of my actions intuitively by ascribing probable motives to my actions, resulting in an explanation that is in a simple sense already a story. Ricoeur calls this process of sensemaking the 'pre narrative level of understanding' or *prefiguration* (Ricoeur 1984, 54). Prefiguration, like all other forms of interpretation, is influenced by historical and cultural factors, causing the probability of certain ascribed motives and intentions to be varied across times and cultures. Going back to the example, it might be the case that I was walking home after a night of partying and the coffee I bought was not for me but for my partner who I knew was going to wake up soon. In the Netherlands this would not be a very probable scenario. In a city like Berlin however, where weekday partying is much more common, it would be. In the process of prefiguration, actions are connected through probable motives. Thereby prefiguration makes an intelligible whole of what would otherwise be a heterogeneous sequence of actions. The choice for particular motives is influenced by cultural and historical factors. Hence, what is taken to be an intelligible whole varies across times and cultures as well.<sup>2</sup> For Ricoeur, what remains constant across times and cultures is that, through prefiguration, a disorderly – or *discordant* - chain of events is grasped together producing an orderly whole – or *concordance*. Therefore, Ricoeur describes the product of the process of prefiguration to be a 'discordant concordance'. Although Ricoeur stresses that the product of prefiguration can differ across times and cultures – i.e., what is considered to be an orderly or intelligible whole differs - he claims the basic notion of prefiguration to be universal for humans. In line with the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition, Ricoeur claims that humans cannot escape from interpreting human actions in terms of volition, motive, and aim, making human action irreducibly narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen refers to this by using the phrase 'communities of intelligibility' (Gergen 2005).

## 1.2 Configuration and Emplotment

Ricoeur explains, with the concept of *prefiguration*, that actions occurring in day-to-day life are interpreted through narrative. He supplements his analysis by investigating the actions and events that occur in actual stories. For Ricoeur, the whole of the story and hence its end are always already implied. Therefore, actions and events in a story come to have a forward movement, that is, a movement towards a certain end (Dowling 2011, 18). This forward movement becomes particularly visible in the strong notion of causality implied in stories. One event does not merely follow the other in a process of succession, rather, it follows *because* of the other in a process of causation. It is important to note that Ricoeur is very precise in his use of the notion of causality. The causality conferred to a chain of events through the process of emplotment is a causality that is rooted in volition and motive, which stand in relation to social and cultural reality. He refers to this form of causality as *narrative causality*, which is different from *physical causality*, by which the causality of processes in the material world that can be described by Newtonian mechanics is meant (Dowling 2011, 64).<sup>3</sup> Narrative causality concerns the binding together of events that seem heterogeneous into an intelligible whole. Ricoeur says:

‘[...] *the recounted story is always more than the enumeration, in an order that would be merely serial or successive, of the incidents or events that it organizes into an intelligible whole.*’ (Ricoeur 1991, 20).

Hence, stories do not only confer meanings to events in relation to the end but also in relation to each other and to the whole, causing the events to be *configured* into the story. This process of configuration, by which events come to have specific meanings and functions with respect to the overarching narrative is also termed *emplotment* (Ricoeur 1991). In a sense, emplotment is already present in day-to-day pre narrative understanding – or prefiguration – which happens through the creation of mini or proto plots consisting of day-to-day activities. The difference here lies in the reader or observer already being aware of the narrative as a whole with an end, causing the continuous implication that the plot is already there (Ricoeur 1991; Dowling 2011, 20). Through prefiguration, a plot is *created*, through configuration, a plot *unfolds*. The notion of the unfolding of an already existing plot becomes exceptionally clear through the feeling of predestination one often gets upon reaching the end of a story. When the end of a story is reached, no other end seems possible: ‘it could not have been otherwise’ is a phrase that is often heard. Since the whole is already present, the reader is aware of the functionality or meaning of the narrated events. The precise function may of course not be clear, but the expectancy of function or meaning is unmistakably present.

“[...] *an event is more than an occurrence; I mean more than something that just happens; it is what contributes to the progress of the narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end.*” (Ricoeur 1991, 21).

The expectation of functionality brings with it the possibility of granting actions and events a degree of importance. Going back to the coffee example, when a person observes me walking, yawning, and buying a coffee, she has no means to assess whether these actions will play an important part in my day. However, when I tell a friend about my morning, she would be able to tell the importance of me buying a cup of coffee by paying attention to, say, the level of detail and the time of narration.<sup>4</sup> After all, it would not make a lot of sense to devote a large propor-

3 Ricoeur notices that in historical reasoning, these two kinds of causality are often mixed. He accuses historians of taking the notion of material causality to apply to social reality, which he regards a category mistake (Dowling 2011, 64).

4 The fraction between the time of narration – *Erzählzeit* – and the narrated time – *erzählte Zeit* – is often indicates the importance of an event. A short event - in the sense of narrated time - that is elaborately described –

tion of a story to describe in detail an event that is of minimal importance to the plot.<sup>5</sup> Ricoeur describes this synthesis of events according to their relevance to the plot in the following way:

*“[...] retelling a story best reveals this synthetic activity at work in composition, to the extent that we are less captivated by the unexpected aspects of the story and more attentive to the way in which it leads to its conclusion.”* (Ricoeur 1991, 22)

In this sense, stories also *select* events; they attract and repel individual events to serve the plot. In short, through the process of emplotment, events are gathered into a single totality – the story – and are thereby configured to have a certain meaning, function, degree of importance, as well as a role in a causal chain. Furthermore, stories are selective towards events with regard to their relevance to the plot.

### 1.3 Historical Narration

Historical narratives are, according to Ricoeur, part of a particular kind of narrative. History differs from fiction in its aim to describe reality as it really happened. That is, in its claim to truth. Ricoeur describes that this crucial difference explicitly shows itself in history’s constant appeal to what he calls *the trace*. He writes: *“If we can speak of observation in history, it is because the trace is to historical knowledge what direct or instrumental observation is to the natural sciences.”* (Ricoeur 2004, 170). The trace is thus what is meant by the observable remnants of the past – testimonies, archives, writings, archaeological finds and so on – which allow history to be verified, corrected, and invalidated. It is with reference to the trace that two different histories can be compared, and that it can be assessed whether one history is more accurate than the other (Dowling 2011, 74). However, history’s ability to accurately describe the past does not solely depend on its drawing correctly and extensively from the trace. Ricoeur explains that both *prefiguration* and *configuration* are present in the writing and understanding of history. History, therefore, carries in it a narrative element. In the past section, it was explained that the meaning and function of events is largely determined through prefiguration and configuration. Since correct portrayal of meaning and function of events is of great importance in history’s aim to accurately describe the past, narrativity is an important factor in the practice of history writing and should be considered as such.

### 1.4 Prefiguration and the Historical Narrative

Ricoeur claims that history is subject to prefiguration due to it being rooted in human action. Historical events – revolutions, conflicts, inventions, journeys – are all partly governed by human volition and are hence understood in terms of goal, motive, and intention. This is what makes history different from say, geology, which studies the history of the earth, or evolutionary biology, which studies the evolutionary history of biological species.<sup>6</sup> The properties that make

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i.e., has a long time of narration – is probably of importance to the plot. (Dowling 2011, 53)

5 When people do spend a large proportion of time telling about an unimportant detail, they often warn the listener beforehand to prevent confusion. For instance, by explicitly saying that what comes next is an extraneous detail, or by apologizing beforehand for ‘going off topic’.

6 Interestingly, some contemporary theories in geology and evolutionary history include the notion of volition. Human actions have a significant impact on the geological processes of the planet, here the notions of narrative and material causality will intertwine more and more. Theories of human evolution also stress the effect of human action on human’s evolutionary course. Human activity is especially important in theories of ecological niche construction (Clark 2006).

human action narrative – motive, volition, goal – cause history, by virtue of it being grounded in human action, to be irreducibly narrative as well; humans understand the actions of historical figures as how they would the actions of their contemporaries. Historical narration, however, is often not about the actions of individuals. It concerns processes that involve abstract collectives like tribes, nations, regions, religions and dominant ideas and worldviews. In Ricoeur’s theory of historical narrative these abstract collectives are treated as actual actors that participate in historical events (Dowling 2011, 70). To illustrate this, Ricoeur takes the example of the Mediterranean in Braudel’s *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, which is described as ‘both site and hero’ performing and suffering from recounted events (Ricoeur 2004, 152:244). Ricoeur describes that ‘the Mediterranean’ should not be taken as the sum of all the individual humans that live on its territories, but as an independent historical actor – a *quasi-character* – whose claim to reality is rooted in the social existence of actual human beings. Since quasi-characters are understood as historical actors, their actions are understood through the process of prefiguration – i.e., in terms of motive, volition, and goal.

National histories often tell the story of the nation as quasi-character. The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’ is no exception. In the canon, various traits are ascribed to ‘the Netherlands’ that refer to it being something more than a mere geographical region or political entity. For example, the first item of the canon describes the ‘first inhabitants of our country of rivers’.<sup>7</sup> The description of the Netherlands as ‘a country of rivers’ does not merely refer to its geographical qualities. The canon explicitly links the presence of water in the Netherlands with the qualities of cooperation and trade (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). This link is explained in a separate thread within the canon which is called ‘*Nederland waterland*’. The idea is that the geographical makeup of the Netherlands – i.e., the presence of water – made the Netherlands into a country characterized by cooperation and trade. The phrase *Nederland waterland*, does not primarily refer to the actual presence of water. Rather, it refers to the qualities the Netherlands acquired because of the presence of water.<sup>8</sup> Dutch Historian Maria Grever also describes the notion of the ‘Dutch battle against water’ as feeding into the narrative template of the Netherlands as ‘a small country bravely defending its freedoms’ (Grever 2020). Similar to the development of the Netherlands as a country of cooperation and trade, the development of the Netherlands as a country of ‘knowledge, science, and innovation’ is captured in a separate thread within the canon. Its beginning is marked at the building of the dolmens or *hunebedden* 3300 BCE, and its continuous development is followed through intellectual, cultural, and technological achievements in the eras that followed (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020). Thereby, these achievements are connected by a kind of ‘Dutch ingenuity’ that is ascribed to the Netherlands as quasi-character.

For Ricoeur, the treatment of an abstract entity as a quasi-character in history is only justified if this entity existed in the social reality of the historical period that is being discussed. In these cases, Ricoeur even considers it necessary to treat abstract entities as independent historical characters because it allows for a better understanding of historical events. After all, the Netherlands as an abstract entity was really occupied by Germany in the 1940’s and was universally understood to have been so at the time (Dowling 2011, 73). However, describing the first inhabitants of the geographical region of what is now called the Netherlands as inhabitants of ‘our land of water’ does not seem justified. Surely, *Nederland waterland* did not exist in the social reality of the Neolithic. Hence, the existence of the Netherlands as a quasi-character with the ascribed characteristics of cooperation and trade is unjustly projected to the period of 5500 BCE. Similarly, the beginning of the development of the quasi-character of the Netherlands as a country of knowledge and science is unjustly marked at 3300 BCE. In both these cases, the

7 Translated from Dutch. The original text was ‘De eerste bewoners van ons rivierenland’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2020).

8 The *poldermodel*, which describes the Dutch consensus model, is arguably the most famous example of this.

abstract entity of the Netherlands as a land of cooperation, trade, knowledge, and innovation did not yet exist in the social reality in the greater portion of the period that is being discussed. However, for readers of the Dutch canon, The Netherlands is not a mere site on which historical events are mapped. From the first item of the canon onwards, The Netherlands performs actions; it fosters a climate of cooperation, it becomes a trading nation, it develops the ingenuity through which it can become a nation of knowledge and science. The development of the Netherlands as quasi-character functions as a plot that influences the way in which historical events are understood through *configuration*.

### 1.5 Configuration and the Historical Narrative

In the telling of history a multitude of events and actions are gathered into a unified and complete whole; the events that make up the historical narrative are configured into events that contribute to the progress of the overarching narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end (Ricoeur 1991, 21). Consequently, the properties of emplotment are also present in historical narration. One event happens *because of* another, the events have specific *functions* in relation to the plot, and the events are more or less *important* with respect to the plot. For example, in the story of the French Revolution poor harvests are seen as one of the primary *causes* of the revolution. Consequently, agriculture obtains a political *function* in the overarching narrative that is of significant *importance*. Interestingly, the poor harvests in France are both caused by a long period of heavy storms that were connected to the eruption of the Laki volcano in Iceland in 1783 and by outdated agricultural methods and bad policy (Weber 2021; Neale 2010). Here the forward movement that is conferred to events in a plot, the selectivity caused by the plot as well as the difference between material and narrative causality become apparent. Ricoeur stresses that it is part of the historian's job to make a proper selection of relevant events. The historian is in this sense similar to the fiction writer; she has to decide which events have to be told for the overarching narrative to be intelligible (Dowling 2011, 64). However, it is in the process of selection that the difference between history and fiction become apparent as well. For, to decide and justify the relevance of selected events, extensive use of the trace is needed. The case of the Laki volcano shows that this selection can never be exhaustive. There will always be causative factors that will be omitted from the historical narrative. Also, it shows the importance, ever stressed by Ricoeur, of discriminating between material and narrative causality. The causal relation between Laki's eruption and the poor harvests, and the causal relation between bad policy and outdated agricultural methods and poor harvests are different in kind. Hence, they must be treated separately.<sup>9</sup>

Emplotment is clearly present in the canon of the Netherlands. Going back to the examples of *Nederland waterland* and the Netherlands as a country of knowledge, science, and innovation, it can be seen that historical events in the canon acquire their meaning in light of these two threads. The first inhabitants of the geographical region that is now called the Netherlands are already described as adjusting their lifestyles to all the water that is present in the Netherlands, and this is then linked to the trait of cooperation and trade. Similarly, the ingenuity of the peoples building the dolmens is marked as the birth of the trait of ingenuity typical of the Netherlands. The forward motion of emplotment is visible here. Implying a set of traits, typical for

<sup>9</sup> These different forms of causality also have different implications with regards to responsibility. Bad agricultural policy is part of the chain of narrative causality. Narrative causality implies a notion of responsibility and hence accountability. Since volition and motivation are involved, someone can be taken responsible for the bad harvests leading up to the discontent that sparked the French Revolution. However, the Laki volcano eruption, being a material cause, is no one's responsibility. Looking at climate change, and human's influence on natural phenomena it will be interesting to see whether material causality will move to the realm of responsibility and accountability in the future.

the Netherlands, to have existed for 7000 years. Events that are included in these threads gain a function and meaning relative to the threads. For example, the dolmens, Erasmus, Spinoza and the Beemster thereby acquire the function of being examples of Dutch ingenuity.

In this paragraph it has been shown how the Ricoeurian concepts of *prefiguration*, *configuration*, and *quasi-character* can be applied to the Canon of the Netherlands. In the next chapters, it will be analysed what this implies for the canon, the criticisms raised to the canon, and the revised edition of the canon.

## 2. The Canon of the Netherlands

The Canon of the Netherlands was first released in 2006. As mentioned before, the direct reason for its formulation was a report that was published by the Dutch Board of Education which concluded that knowledge of Dutch history and culture has severely declined in the Dutch population (Grever et al. 2006, 107). The composition of a national canon was proposed as a solution to this problem and hence a committee consisting of 8 individuals of varied historical expertise was given the task to compile ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006, 100). The Netherlands is not the only country in which an increased emphasis on the nation in history curricula is currently being argued for. Recently, England, Spain, the United States, and Canada have seen similar tendencies in which a decline of knowledge concerning national history is given as a reason to change history education. (Létourneau 2017). It was already mentioned that national histories are often as old as nations themselves (Berger 2017). However, it is argued that the current pleas for an emphasis on the nation in history education are caused by recent phenomena. The rise of individual identities, the increase of international migrations, and the growing globalism of younger generations are named as important factors (Létourneau 2017; de Mul 2011). Not all aforementioned countries have opted for a canon. Nonetheless, the alternatives are quite similar to the Canon of the Netherlands, in that they are chronologically ordered narratives that take the nation as their focal point.<sup>10</sup>

### 2.1 The Canon and its Critics

After its release, ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’ has received mixed reactions. In general, the positive reactions rely on the idea of the nation as a reality rooted in space and time, encompassing central and valuable elements that must be cherished (Létourneau 2017). In this view, historical narration is seen as a means to teach and preserve these elements.<sup>11</sup> This idea is also reflected in the main aim of the Dutch canon, which is to formulate the ‘valuable parts of our culture and history that we want to pass on to new generations through education’ (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006). The negative reactions generally rely on a conception of the nation as a non-static and plural entity that is always in the process of self-actualization (Létourneau 2017). Here, it is questioned whether nations even have central elements. Also, if there are elements that can be identified as central to a nation, these elements are seen as fleeting and constantly subject to change. A national canon does not suit this view, since it tries to identify, capture, and preserve the nation’s central elements. In the paragraphs that follow, I will briefly list the main criticisms that were given to the canon.

The reason that was given for the necessity of a national canon was an alleged knowledge deficit concerning Dutch history and culture. This knowledge deficit is questioned due

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<sup>10</sup> For an overview of the alternatives that have been proposed in other countries see: Létourneau 2017.

<sup>11</sup> The pleas for more nationally centred history education in other countries – England, Spain, the United States, and Canada – also rely on this notion of the nation. Furthermore, history education is also argued to have as its aim the preservation of the nation’s central elements (Létourneau 2017).

to its lack of empirical evidence (Grever 2006). Also, the idea that a national canon is the best solution to the alleged knowledge deficit is said to not be sufficiently justified. Several Dutch historians have argued that the old curriculum already includes plenty national items, which, provided that they are properly learned, would give sufficient knowledge of national history. According to them, the improvement of historical education by investing in the education of history teachers that are both skilled historians and competent instructors, and the reintroduction of history as a compulsory subject, would have greater effect on students' knowledge of national history than the introduction of the national canon (Grever, Stuurman, et al. 2006; Nieuwenhuys, Paepe, and Grever 2019; Stuurman 2006a).

As for the actual canon, the criticism targets both the national perspective that functions as a thread holding all the individual items together, and the items themselves. National history writing is not a prevalent part of the academic discipline of history today. Claiming that history education should also teach students about history as an academic discipline, it is argued that national history should not be the focus of history education either. As an alternative to the national framework, many historians stress the importance of global and comparative history (Stuurman 2006a; Létourneau 2017; Grever 2020). Education in global and comparative history does not necessarily imply a rejection of the teaching of national history. A specific national event – such as a revolution – can be compared to similar events that occurred at the same time in other countries or to similar events that occurred in different historical times. Furthermore, national events can be seen in the light of global developments occurring at that specific time. It is even argued that by contextualizing the national event in this way, greater knowledge of the event is gained (Stuurman 2006a).

Another argument for the importance of global and comparative history stresses their relevance to student's daily lives. Most students live in a highly globalized world, constantly experiencing phenomena that are influenced by factors from all around the globe. Comparative and global history would make the students better equipped to make sense of their experiences (Stuurman 2006a; de Mul 2011).

Finally, the individual items that make up the canon are criticized mainly for their one-sidedness. For instance, it is claimed that there is an overemphasis on political history in the canon. Also, the stark imbalance between female and male historical figures is criticized, and it is argued that the canon draws an overly positive picture of the Netherlands by not paying enough attention to the dark pages of Dutch history (Rusman 2018; Jonker 2006; Rijpma 2020; van der Heijden 2012).<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 The Canon Revised

In the summer of 2019, the minister of Education decided that the canon was in need of revision. The aim of this revision was to 'assess the choices that were made by the first canon committee', to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of 'stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society', and to pay more attention to the 'dark pages of Dutch history' (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020, 17:24). The revision consisted of the substitution of 10 of the 50 items, and a rewriting of the texts accompanying all the items (Funnekotter 2020). Furthermore, it was decided that a recalibration of the contents of the canon is to take place every ten years.

The aim of this paper is to assess whether the revised canon is a good solution to the main criticisms of the first version of the canon. From the criticisms mentioned in the previous chapter, four main strands of criticism can be distilled. Firstly, the claim that the canon would

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<sup>12</sup> These criticisms cannot be seen as separate; a narrative that is mainly focused on political history is likely to consist of more male than female historical figures, also, it will repel perspectives of groups that have existed in the political margins, which in turn might lead to a shallow treatment of the 'dark pages' of Dutch history.

improve Dutch national history education was rejected. Rather than changing the contents of the history curriculum it was argued that an investment in the education of history teachers, and the reintroduction of history as a compulsory subject would be more effective (Grever, Jonker, et al. 2006; Stuurman 2006a; Nieuwenhuys, Paepe, and Grever 2019). Secondly, it was argued that global and comparative history are closer to history as an academic discipline and that this should be reflected in history education. Thirdly, it was argued that global and comparative history are better suited to teach students about national historical events by putting them in a broader context. Furthermore, these types of history were argued to better fit the life worlds of students and to provide students with (Stuurman 2006a). Lastly, it was argued that the items of the canon are too one-sided and that the items draw up an overly positive view of Dutch history (Rusman 2018; Jonker 2006; Rijpma 2020; van der Heijden 2012).

Clearly, no revision of the canon will render a solution to the first criticism, after all, this criticism rejects the idea of the canon altogether. Also, comparative, and global history are not considered in the revised canon. National events are not compared to similar events occurring in different places and times, and they are not put in a global context. Hence the second criticism is not met either. However, the revised canon can in a way be seen as a solution to the other criticisms. One formal requirement for the revision was to better portray the plurality of the Dutch past through the inclusion of ‘stories and perspectives of different groups in Dutch society’ (Commissie Herijking Canon van Nederland 2020, 17:24). This requirement was met through the inclusion of the windows ‘Maria van Bourgondië’, ‘Sara Burgerhart’, ‘Anton de Kom’, ‘Marga Klompé’, and ‘Gastarbeiders’. Hence, the new canon is more plural in that it includes a larger array of historical figures. Also, the revised canon pays more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ in the windows ‘VOC en WIC’, ‘Slavernij’, and ‘Indonesië’.

Furthermore, the decision was made to recalibrate the canon every ten years. This is seen as promising since periodic recalibrations could cause the array of historical figures and events to be broadened in the future (Trouw Redactie 2020; NRC Redactie 2020). Also, taking into account that criticism of the canon often relies on a non-static idea of the nation, regular recalibration could be seen as a means to unite the idea of a non-static nation with a national canon. However, many critics have not been satisfied. The common reaction to the revision is: ‘Yes, the new canon includes more perspectives than the first version, but still, more perspectives are needed.’ (Rijpma 2020). In short, despite the revisions, it is still argued that the plurality of the Dutch past is not sufficiently portrayed in the canon. Now it can be queried what kind of canon would portray the plurality of the past in a sufficient way. What kind of revision would be enough to soothe the criticisms? How many items of the canon should be revised? How much attention should be paid to the ‘dark chapters of Dutch history’ to do justice to it? In the next chapter, Ricoeur’s narrative theory will be used in an attempt to answer these questions.

### 3. Ricoeur and the Canon

In Ricoeur’s view, rival claims about historical truth are not asserted by producing new historical facts or by supplementing existing narratives with untold or overshadowed historical events, rather, these events have to be invoked ‘to tell an alternative story about the past’ (Dowling 2011, 74). Taking Ricoeur’s narrative theory, this claim can be further elucidated and applied to ‘the Canon of the Netherlands’. In the first chapter, it has been explained that the Netherlands is taken as a quasi-character in the canon, whose actions are understood through the process of prefiguration. Also, it has been described that the events making up the canon are configured into the national plot, which confers meaning, function, and a level of importance to these events. All these narrative elements influence the manner in which historical events are understood, and hence the degree to which history can accurately describe the past. Therefore, the narrative element of history should be taken into account when evaluating to what extent the canon is – or can become – a representation of the ‘plurality of the Dutch past’.

### 3.1 Narrativity and the Canon

The process of prefiguration can have a significant impact on student's understanding of the historical events included in the canon. The canon spans 7500 years, the Dutch nation however, is 400 years old. As mentioned in the first chapter, Ricoeur argues that an abstract entity should only be treated as a quasi-character in history when this entity existed in the social reality of the historical period that is being discussed. In the Dutch canon, the treatment of the Netherlands as a quasi-character is hence only justified for quite a small fraction of the total time period that is encompassed. From this it follows that the Dutch canon constructs a quasi-character that – for a large part of the canon – has no historical reality. Still, due to the process of prefiguration, students will likely connect events pertaining to 'the Netherlands' – as a quasi-character – throughout the canon. Similarly, it was explained that the process of emplotment causes events to acquire specific meanings and functions with regard to the overarching narrative, also it was explained that events gain a forward movement towards the narrative's end by means of causality rather than succession. The example of the dolmens shows that the historical event 'the building of the dolmens' acquires a specific meaning in the plot that describes the development of the Netherlands as a country of knowledge, science, and innovation. Namely, it describes the first example of ingenuity in Dutch history, that leads up to many more intellectual and technological achievements. Taking the long timespan of the canon, it can thus be criticized that the meaning, function, and causal implications of events that took place thousands of years before anything akin to 'the Netherlands' – apart from it being a geographical region – existed, are nonetheless influenced by the Dutch narrative.

Emplotment of events in the Dutch narrative does not only pose problems to events occurring in the distant past, but configuration also confers meaning, function, and a degree of importance throughout the canon. All events in the canon are hence configured into the Dutch plot, granting them meanings, functions, and a degree of importance relative to *the Netherlands*. Thereby, the global meaning, function, and importance of these events are diminished at best, and dismissed at worst.

In the previous chapter it has been mentioned that, albeit the revisions made to the canon, criticisms concerning its one-sidedness are still not soothed. I think the root of these criticisms, which plead for a canon that better portrays the plurality of the past and that pays more attention to the dark side of history, is to be found in its narrative dimension.

### 3.2 The Plurality of the Dutch Past

It has already been explained that prefiguration poses a problem to the timespan of the canon, in which the Netherlands is for a large part unjustly posited as a quasi-character. In addition to this, prefiguration poses another problem. The interpretation of events and actions in narratives is influenced by our temporal and cultural situatedness, which form implicit *models of sense-making* (Meretoja 2014). Ricoeur mentions that: 'The reader is pointed toward the sort of figure that likens the narrated events to a narrative form that our culture has made us familiar with.' (Ricoeur 1988, 153). One component that is argued to be prevalent in western *models of sense-making* is the idea of coherence or unity (Maan 2015). Indeed, characters in stories are often expected to behave in a coherent or consistent manner. Characters can of course act in ways that do not conform to this expected coherence, but these actions will then be interpreted *as deviations* (Maan 2015). This is problematic when the Netherlands is taken as a historical-quasi character, since events seem more complicated if they are interpreted as deviations from an expected pattern. In the presence of an expected pattern, additional explanation as to why the Netherlands deviated from this pattern is needed. In the example of the Netherlands as a nation that is good at cooperation and trade, this would mean that the historical periods in which the Netherlands is not being cooperative - or big in trade or science - need additional explanation. Furthermore, historical figures that do not possess the qualities of trade, cooperation, and inge-

nity, run the risk of being interpreted as atypical, eccentric, or strange – i.e., as deviating from the Dutch pattern. In the case of the canon, the pattern consists of the characteristics ascribed to the Netherlands as quasi-character. Thereby it describes central or core elements of the Netherlands which, as mentioned earlier, are rejected by the critics of the canon. Hence, it makes sense that even after the revision, the criticism of the canon being too one-sided is still being raised. However, the solution that is being proposed, namely the making of periodic revisions in which items in the canon are replaced, will most likely not be sufficient, since these kinds of revisions leave the core elements in place. In other words, periodic revisions falsely imply a non-static idea of the nation, and hence will likely not soothe the critics that plea for an accurate description of the plurality of the Dutch past.

### 3.3 The Dark Pages of Dutch History

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the revised canon pays more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ through the inclusion of the items ‘VOC en WIC’, ‘Slavernij’, and ‘Indonesië’. This was done as an answer to the claim that the canon draws an overly positive picture of Dutch history. However, Ricoeur describes that rival claims about history are not asserted by supplementing existing narratives with untold or overshadowed historical events. According to Ricoeur, these events have to be invoked ‘to tell an alternative story about the past’ (Dowling 2011, 74). In the canon, the qualities of the Netherlands as quasi-character – trade, knowledge, cooperation – are described as having both positive and negative consequences. It is stressed that the Netherlands due to it being technologically advanced and due to it being a nation of trade carried out violent and unjust actions. Through the inclusion of the items ‘VOC en WIC’, and ‘Slavernij’, more attention is being paid to these negative consequences. However, it seems that the main problem is not that these traits were framed as positive before the revision of the canon. The problem is that these traits are posited as the main and consistent traits of the Netherlands, that have developed for thousands of years. Stressing the negative consequences of these traits or adding historical events that seem at odds with these traits will not change this. The negative consequences of the typical Dutch characteristic of trade, for example, can be stressed by teaching about slavery, the VOC, and the WIC. However, due to them being emplotted in the narrative of the Netherlands as nation of cooperation and trade they will be just that: negative consequences.

Interestingly, there is a recent example in which overshadowed historical events are used to tell an alternative story about the Dutch past. In the book ‘Roofstaat’ – burglary state – episodes of Dutch colonial history are described with the aim of showing that violence, and the unjust treatment of other peoples are essential characteristics – *wezenskenmerken* – of the Dutch past (Bossema 2016). It aims to reveal the pattern of violence and burglary underlying the period of Dutch history from the 13<sup>th</sup> century until the present (Vanvugt 2016).<sup>13</sup> Here, the characteristics of violence and burglary are ascribed to the Netherlands. Similar to the historical events described in the canon, the events in *Roofstaat* are configured into a Dutch plot. Contrary to the canon, *Roofstaat* has violence as its main element, rather than as a negative consequence, thus it could be seen as a more genuine depiction of the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’.

However, alternative nationally centred narratives, such as *Roofstaat*, can be criticized with the same arguments that were used to criticize the canon - the Netherlands is treated as a *quasi-character* over a longer timespan than is justified, expected *coherency complicates* historical events, violence and burglary are described *as main elements* of the Netherlands, and historical events are *configured* into a Dutch narrative – hardly rendering them a solution. It seems as if the challenge is to do justice to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ without running the risk of ascribing that ‘darkness’ as a central element of the Netherlands.

13 *Roofstaat* is similar to the Canon of the Netherlands in its claim to be necessary reading material for ‘every Dutch person’ (Vanvugt 2016). Hence, *Roofstaat* wants to tell ‘the Dutch story’ as well.

### 3.4 How to tell the past in the future?

It is clear that the revised Canon of the Netherlands is no sufficient solution to the main criticisms of the previous version. Although the revised canon has become more pluralistic and spends more attention to the ‘dark pages of Dutch history’ it has been explained that the narrative elements present in the canon cause the criticisms concerning these matters to persist. Furthermore, the narrative elements present in the canon – the Netherlands as quasi-character with core characteristics, prefiguration, and configuration – pose serious problems to the ambition of the Dutch state to formulate a canon that can represent the plurality of the Dutch past through a continuous process of recalibration. Even if the Dutch canon would include a rich multitude of perspectives, these perspectives will be configured into a plot that will then influence its meaning, function, and degree of importance in relation to the Dutch narrative. Through the example of *Roofstaat*, it was shown that alternative narratives run the risk of falling into the same pitfalls as the canon. This is due to them ascribing to the idea of the nation as a reality that has central characteristics – i.e., trade and cooperation or burglary and violence. Since criticism of the canon generally departs from a rejection of this conception of the nation it can be argued the only national history that would soothe the criticisms will be one that doesn’t propose any central national elements – be them negative, or positive.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper departed from Paul Ricoeur’s narrative theory. It has been discussed how narrative is inherent to the interpretation of human action through *prefiguration*. Also, it has been explained that actions and events in stories are configured to have a specific meaning and function with regard to the overarching narrative in the process of *emplotment*. Historical narratives are particular kinds of narratives and differ from fiction in their aim to describe the past as it really happened. The extent to which a historical narrative fulfils this aim is both dependent on its extensive and accurate reference to the *trace*, and on the narrative elements of prefiguration and configuration. Applying Ricoeur’s theory of narrative to the Canon of the Netherlands it has been shown that a periodic recalibration of the items in the canon will not render a solution to its main criticisms. In the canon, the Netherlands is described as a quasi-character with various central characteristics. The development of the Netherlands, as having these characteristics is followed throughout the canon, and hence the idea of the nation as having central elements that persist through time is endorsed. The items in the canon are configured into this national plot that influences their meaning, function, and importance. The ‘Canon of the Netherlands’, despite its ambitions, will most probably never be a good representation of the plurality of the Dutch past, since it relies on the idea of a nation with several central elements that need to be preserved. A national history that would do justice to the plurality of the Dutch past and that thereby recognizes the plurality of the present, will have to be one that doesn’t propose any central national elements.

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# Being Recognizable: From Human to Posthuman Relational Ethics

Victoria Fareld

The philosophical understanding of recognition as a struggle in which a self appears through the figure of the other has been centered, since Hegel, around the privileged category of the human. In this essay, I will discuss how the turn in contemporary critical theory, away from the constitutive category of the human, calls for a reconceptualization of recognition. I argue that the ongoing reevaluation of the place of animals within the humanities has the potential to turn recognition into a relevant concept in discussions about human-nonhuman relations.

By discerning three approaches to recognition, I will highlight ways in which the categories we call identity, subjectivity, agency, humanity and animality are articulated in relation to each other at certain moments in time and how, depending on our understanding of them, certain types of recognition are possible and others are not.

## 1. Three Approaches

Recognition – commonly described as a “vital human need” (Taylor 1992, 26) or a “moral grammar of social conflicts” (Honneth 1996) – revolves around human relationality and vulnerability. In light of the politicization of social identity and cultural belonging in the 1990’s, recognition centered around identity and otherness, framed by the relation between self and other originating from Hegel’s philosophy. As Hegel showed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), a self can only become a self in and through its other. Otherness is thus not merely something located outside the self, but rather an essential part of the self. Were there to be no otherness in identity, there would be also no self-identity. Or, put differently: Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my identity is and is not mine – it is who I am, yet it never belongs to me. Here we have, very schematically, the *intersubjective* framing of recognition that focuses on reciprocity, identity, and subjectivity.

At the turn of the new millennium, analytical attention started to shift from the formation of identity through others, to the political and social space in which questions of recognition are played out. The growing interest in addressing questions of *recognizability* not only signaled an important shift of focus in the politico-philosophical debate to the power relations intrinsic to the recognition dynamic, but also questioned how inequalities are reproduced in the recognition process itself. The call for analysis of the normative practices governing and regulating recognizability is also to be understood as a response to the aftermaths of 9/11, when the socially and politically mediated space in which human beings appear as recognizable or not, became a matter of great concern. Here we have, again very schematically, the emergence of what might be called a *biopolitical* approach to recognition, addressing human vulnerability in relation to migration and state violence, while focusing on the sociopolitical structures that make us recognizable to each other in the first place. By critically analysing the mechanisms of exclusion operative in liberal, democratic societies that make certain people unrecognizable, the question of recognition was extended beyond the intersubjective realm to the domain of structural violence (Agamben 1998; Rancière 2004; Butler 2009).

The growing attentiveness to questions of recognizability paved the way, I suggest, for a third approach – let’s call it *posthumanist* for lack of a better name – which corresponds to ongoing discussions about human-nonhuman relations. By questioning the traditional human-animal divide, stressing instead the socio-political structures that generate this divide (and the categories of the human and the animal), also non-human lives are turned into recognizable figures (Wolfe 2003a; 2003b; 2012; Atterton and Calarco 2004). This position not only transgresses the human centered framing of recognition, but also rescripts categories that are taken for granted, revealing that our statuses as subjects, objects, humans or non-humans have been

not only historically indeterminate, but remain fundamentally unsettled.

## 2. From Recognition to Responsibility

The history of slavery and colonialism has showed us, by exposing the structures that govern recognizability, that what it is to be human is not given. In fact, not much about human beings seem to be recognizable to us in general, without mediations through socially regulated practices. What ultimately counts as human, at a certain moment in time, is conditioned by the discursive, socio-political processes determining recognizability.

Against this background, recognition is not primarily understood as referring to a human need to be respected and affirmed in one's identity as a unique individual, but rather – in order to be recognizable at all – about being interpellated as subject; included in a certain space, and subjected to the norms and practices governing this space.

This perspective implies a critical reflection upon the conditions and social norms under which individuals appear as recognizable. The important questions it addresses are which institutionalized processes and norms make some recognizable, as worthy of recognition as unique individuals whose lives count as liveable lives, and which mechanisms make some unrecognizable in liberal societies' institutional structures of recognition.

Judith Butler's work, *Precarious Life* (2006) and *Frames of War* (2009) are both dealing with these questions. Butler is of course not alone in addressing them, but her way of working with recognizability to uncover the social and political mechanisms through which life appears more or less human cuts across biopolitical discussions about ways to perceive, govern, and administrate human life and how these forms of power are inseparable from the definition of human life itself.

Intimately connected to Butler's discussion on recognizability is her idea of global responsibility: "Such a responsibility", she writes, "can only begin to be realized through a critical reflection on those exclusionary norms by which fields of recognizability are constituted" (Butler 2009, 36). This requires a self-reflexive questioning of one's own position. Butler again: "what are the implicit frames of recognizability in play when I 'recognize' someone as 'like' me? What implicit political order produces and regulates 'likeness' in such instances?" (36)

By turning questions of recognition into questions of recognizability, the mechanisms that prevent us from recognizing others can be critically analyzed: why some lives are considered worthy of protection, while others are not; why some end up being abandoned and have to endure exploitation, oppression, and violence, while others do not.

## 3. Making Nonhuman Beings Recognizable

Questions of recognizability have broadened the analytical scope to systematically consider the category of the nonhuman. In a posthumanist approach to recognition, the biopolitical questioning of the centrality of the subject is taken one step further and is turned into a critical examination of the human-centeredness of the relational ontology and the anthropocentrism at the heart of dominant recognition theories.

But if the aim of such an approach is a decentering of the category of the human, why stick to an old human-centered concept like recognition? Many would say that recognition, after all, must be claimed and that it, played out in a discursive or intersubjective realm, in which reciprocity, struggle and violence are essential features, does not help us much in clarifying our moral responsibility for nonhuman lives.

A tentative answer would be that traditional recognition theories have pointed to the limits of humanist ethics, and that there are epistemic and ethical gains to be made by bringing those theories into conversation with other fields, like human-animal studies. Paradoxically, a starting point for such a conversation could be found in Emmanuel Levinas' critique of Hegelian

dialectic of recognition. Articulated as a rejection of the assimilation of otherness in the act of recognition in favor of an ethics of responsibility for the other as “Other”, Levinas’ philosophy harbors a posthumanist potential in spite of its humanist core. Levinas himself reserved the category of the Other to a human subject (Levinas 1969). But as Jacques Derrida puts it in his critique of Levinas: “If I am responsible for the other [...] isn’t the animal more other still, more radically other, if I might put it that way, than the other in whom I recognize my brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor? (Derrida 2008, 107)

If we take seriously Levinas’ call for an infinite responsibility for the (otherness of the) Other we would have reasons to extend the scope of recognition to “all beings that can suffer and are capable of expressing that suffering to me”, as Peter Atterton suggests (Atterton 2011, 633). This would mean that we have to rethink what it means to make a claim for recognition. An animal that can express suffering to us would be considered as able to make moral claims on us, and thus be treated as an Other for whom we have an infinite and asymmetrical responsibility. This would, of course, open up for difficult questions of line drawing, of who should be subjects of recognition based on such an ethics. In a current global situation that requires of us an intensified examination of the interimplication of the human and the non-human, a grappling with issues like these seems like a better alternative, however, than to stick to old divisions and categories reflecting a human world that we, ethically and epistemologically, no longer can sustain.

The extensive and rich debate about extending moral status to animals exceeds by far the scope of this text. All I can do here is hint at the potential in becoming more Levinasian than Levinas himself, in line with Atterton’s suggestion, by transcending the human centeredness of his ethics of alterity and develop it in new directions.

In Latin, there is a well-known distinction between two words that are both used to describe the other, namely *alter* and *alius*. Whereas *alter* refers to a particular somebody, a specific other, *alius*, on the contrary, is an unspecific, undefined other; too different or distant to recognize as someone particular (Dupont 2002; cf. Agamben 2004, 6). By drawing attention to the traditional role of animals as *alius* to humans, a posthumanist theory of recognizability would make us more attentive to how structures of non-recognizability affect non-human beings.

Just as the history of slavery and colonialism has captured the discursive, biopolitical category of the human in exposing how dehumanization has served as a condition for the production of the human, the history of human-nonhuman relations should be written by way of a reconceptualization of the human. In the writing of such a history, the analytical value of a posthumanist approach to recognition would consist of making us aware of how and for what reasons we construct and assert difference and sameness in human-nonhuman relations, letting ‘the human’ re-cognize itself and its constitutive relation to ‘the non-human’, as *alter*, *alius*, or Other.

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