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## Recognition and social freedom

### Introduction

The belief that freedom has an irreducibly social dimension has a long history, going back to at least Rousseau and developed by the likes of Marx and Arendt. To claim that freedom has a “social” dimension is to argue that a person’s social environment must be configured in a specific way for her to be free.<sup>1</sup> However, there is disagreement about what the freedom-constituting social conditions are.<sup>2</sup> One view is that they are primarily recognitive. As both Fichte and Hegel argued, in order to be free, social agents must mutually recognise one another. The aim of this paper is to establish what form(s) of recognition we need to be free and why.

To achieve this, I examine the work of Axel Honneth, who has produced one of the most extensive and influential contemporary discussions of social freedom. He constructs what I term a “self-realisation” account of social freedom (Section 1). This holds that the free agent is one who has a sufficiently positive, undamaged relation-to-self, which can be obtained only through the affirmative attitudes of others. Despite its many insights, I argue that ultimately it fails to provide an adequate conceptualisation of the freedom-recognition relationship (Section 2). The main issue is that the self-realisation account is too focused on, and reliant upon, a psychological, developmental account of the free subject. I thus develop a “normative authorisation” account as a more plausible way of understanding social freedom in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> The “weak” version of this idea is that social conditions are causally necessary for becoming a free agent. The “strong” version is that social conditions are conceptually / constitutively part of what it means to be free. I discuss this distinction in Section 4.

<sup>2</sup> For example, collective self-determination (Rousseau, 1968), non-alienation (Marx, 1977) or non-domination (Pettit, 1999).

interpersonal recognition (Section 3). According to this model, a person is free if she is recognised as discursive equal able to engage in justificatory dialogue with other social agents about the appropriateness of her reasons for action. In other words, we are free if we can discourse critically about our practical agency. This requires that we recognise one another as having the status of free and rational beings (i.e. discursive equals). Importantly, this account eschews the focus on psychological development and self-realisation that underpins Honneth's model. To substantiate it, I draw from Robert Pippin's neo-Hegelian theory of freedom and recent work on relational autonomy.

I conclude by offering some reasons in support of the normative authorisation account (Section 4). First, I show why it is not vulnerable to the concerns I raise about Honneth's account. I then defend it against the criticisms that it is too abstract and demanding. To the contrary, I show that it captures a basic feature of our everyday, normative interactions. Next, I argue that it can make good sense of the connection between self-worth and being autonomous. Hence, it can incorporate valuable features of Honneth's theory whilst avoiding its difficulties. Finally, I suggest that it fits well with the concept of epistemic justice, which provides it with an important theoretical advantage over the self-realisation account. In sum, the normative authorisation account is an explanatorily powerful, inclusive theory of social freedom that is built around key elements of our social relationships as normative, rational beings and which fits well with wider accounts of justice and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Thus, I argue that it represents the most promising way of understanding social freedom in terms of interpersonal recognition.

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<sup>3</sup> Consequently, even if one is unconvinced by the concerns I raise about Honneth's account, there are still reasons to prefer the normative authorisation account.

## 1. Recognition, social freedom and self-realisation

In *Freedom's Right*, Axel Honneth (2014) argues that freedom is the dominant political value of contemporary Western societies. The same can be said of freedom in relation to his own oeuvre: a focus on the social conditions of freedom and how they can be realised in society runs through his major works (e.g. Honneth, 1995, 2012; Honneth and Fraser, 2003). His central claim is that individuals can only become free if they stand in appropriate relations of mutual recognition with other social agents.<sup>4</sup> To quote Honneth, 'we can only grasp ourselves as being "free" to the extent that we are addressed and treated as such by others' (Willig, 2012: 148). This was the basic insight developed in *The Struggle for Recognition* and it continues to underpin the views advanced in *Freedom's Right*, even if the notion of intersubjective recognition is less explicitly discussed in the latter. As Honneth has stated, 'My new book [*Freedom's Right*] basically follows through on the intention of *The Struggle for Recognition* in as much as I still regard relations of mutual recognition as the condition for individual freedom' (Willig, 2012: 148).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, although Honneth's theory of recognition is often focused on constructing an account of justice and legitimate social movements, grounded in appropriate and adequate institutionalised recognition relations, he argues that 'the reason that we should be interested in establishing a just social order is that it is only under these conditions

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<sup>4</sup> Honneth also writes of the importance of recognition for achieving an intact identity and personality (Honneth, 2004); self-actualisation (Honneth, 2012: 30); a successful life (1995: 174); identification with one's qualities and abilities (Honneth, 2012: 81; 83) and personal integrity (Honneth, 1992). Sometimes he seems to equate these with being autonomous and other times as parts of the good life and just society more generally. There is not space here to address whether these are synonymous. Instead, I will focus on the importance of recognition for freedom/autonomy, which Honneth frequently construes as self-realisation.

<sup>5</sup> In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth (2014: 15) defines freedom as 'the autonomy of the individual'. Hence, he seems to treat autonomy and freedom as interchangeable.

that subjects can attain the most undamaged possible self-relation, and thus individual autonomy' (Honneth and Fraser, 2003: 259).

The above quote indicates the tight connection Honneth draws between self-realisation (“the most undamaged possible self-relation”) and freedom (“individual autonomy”).<sup>6</sup> Following Hegel (1991) and Mead (1972), Honneth identifies three distinct forms of interpersonal recognition, each of which is necessary for the agent to achieve a sufficiently positive relation-to-self and hence to be autonomous. These are love, respect and esteem, which correlate with three social spheres from which such recognition emanates (the family, civil society / law, and the state / economy). Receiving adequate recognition from each of these spheres is necessary if the individual is to become a free agent. For example, Honneth (1995: 163) writes of the ‘social patterns of recognition that allow subjects to know themselves to be both autonomous and individuated beings within their socio-cultural environment’. Similarly, he claims that it is only through love, respect and esteem that a person ‘can come to see him or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and individuated being’ (Honneth, 1995: 169). Honneth’s theory is thus underpinned by a developmental, psychological account of freedom construed as self-realisation (a move he thinks is necessary in order to “naturalise” Hegel and avoid the metaphysics of Spirit). The free/autonomous agent is one who has passed through successive stages of psychic maturation, in which sufficient self-confidence, -respect and -esteem has been instilled. Indeed, Honneth (1995: 80) explicitly refers to Hegel’s account of recognition, upon which his theory is based, as a ‘developmental model’.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Honneth defines autonomy as ‘a certain type of relation-to-self that allows us to be confident of our needs and beliefs, and to value our own capacities’ (Honneth, 2012: 41). He describes self-realisation as ‘a process of realizing, without coercion, one’s self-chosen life-goals’ (Honneth, 1995: 174). These seem mutually-referential descriptions of what, for Honneth, it means to be free/autonomous.

<sup>7</sup> This highlights the emphasis that Honneth places on the Aristotelian elements of Hegel’s work (or, perhaps, the Aristotelian reading he makes of Hegel). It allows Honneth to argue that there is an inner process or “logic” (an

This basic theoretical commitment to freedom as self-realisation, obtainable only through the positive recognition of others, persists into Honneth's later work. For example, in *The I in the We*, he writes that 'we achieve autonomy along intersubjective paths by learning to understand ourselves, via others' recognition, as beings whose needs, beliefs and abilities are worth being realized' (Honneth, 2012: 41). Consequently, 'We do not acquire autonomy on our own, but only in relation to other people who are willing to appreciate us... Autonomy is a relational, intersubjective entity, not a monological achievement' (Honneth, 2012: 41). This idea is developed further in an essay co-authored with Joel Anderson. They state that 'the agentic competencies that comprise autonomy require that one be able to sustain certain attitudes toward oneself (in particular, self-trust, self-respect, and self-esteem) and that these affectively laden self-conceptions... are dependent, in turn, on the sustaining attitudes of others' (Anderson and Honneth, 2005: 130–1). Consequently, one's relationship to oneself 'is not a matter of a solitary ego reflecting on itself, but is the result of an ongoing *intersubjective* process, in which one's attitude toward oneself emerges in one's encounter with another's attitude toward oneself' (Anderson and Honneth, 2005: 131).

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth characterises this intersubjective dimension of freedom through Hegel's notion of "being free with oneself in the other", which he sees as 'rooted in a conception of social institutions in which subjects can grasp each other as the other of their own selves' (Honneth, 2014: 41). Key to this is the idea of subjects 'mutually completing each other' (Honneth, 2014: 67). Interpersonal recognition thus becomes a matter of mutual affirmation, a sort of ego-synthesis, in which we can be / realise ourselves with each other:

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immanent telos) to the successful self-development (i.e. flourishing) of the individual, which can only be achieved through affirmative social recognition.

‘there is a special kind of freedom in personal relationships, in which two persons enable each other to consummate their own selves’ (Honneth, 2014: 132). Drawing the above observations together, Honneth can be read as offering an account of social freedom that consists in individuals achieving self-realisation, understood as the development of a sufficiently positive, undamaged self-relation, which are only obtained by being loved, respected and esteemed by others.<sup>8</sup> This ensures that individuals have sufficient self-confidence, -respect and -esteem to pursue and realise their conception of the good. The successful pursuit and realisation of this requires that others enable and promote the individual’s intentions, which is ensured by institutions that mediate the normative interactions between them in a recognition-facilitating and freedom-friendly way.

## **2. Four problems with the self-realisation account**

I believe that Honneth is right to insight that mutual recognition should occupy a central position in an account of freedom. However, I question the way that he characterises the freedom-recognition relationship. This section identifies four such concerns. All of them stem, ultimately, from the developmental, psychological model of recognition and self-realisation underpinning Honneth’s account.

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<sup>8</sup> To quote Zurn (2015: 189), ‘the sphere of personal relations institutionally allows individuals to realize their inner natures – their needs, emotions, and personal characteristics – through being intersubjectively confirmed in their own distinctive personality... such personal relations are, according to Honneth, indispensable social conditions for individual self-realization’.

First, it reduces the importance of recognition to its impact upon the psychic development and flourishing of agents.<sup>9</sup> In other words, social recognition is relevant for our freedom only insofar as it contributes to the achievement of a positive self-relation, which enable us to have the requisite confidence to pursue our life-plans. Whilst it is true that we are often very sensitive to the ways that others respect and esteem us (or fail to), there is more to interpersonal recognition relations than their contribution to a positive relation-to-self. For example, McBride (2013: 140) has developed an “interactionist” model of recognition, according to which recognition functions primarily ‘as a sort of feedback mechanism helping us to monitor and correct our actions’. On his view, recognition struggles between agents are to be understood first and foremost as struggles for *authority* over the interpretation of the norms that structure, guide and give meaning to our understanding of ourselves, our projects and our relations to other people and the world (cf. Pinkard, 1994). Along similar lines, Ikäheimo describes a “deontic dimension of personhood”, which expresses people’s capacity to ‘regulate their thoughts and actions, and structure their lifeworld, with *norms*’ (Ikäheimo, 2009: 36). Following Brandom, he identifies ‘intersubjective (or interpersonal) recognition as a necessary constituent of collective practices of norm-administration’ (ibid). Consequently, recognition matters, in part, because it enables us to engage in this vitally important social practice.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fraser (2003) criticises Honneth for “psychologising” recognition. However, Fraser’s concern is about the role that experiences of misrecognition play in identifying and remedying injustices. She worries that Honneth is too focused on the psychological effects of recognition, which delimits the critical impact of his theory as an account of justice. Ikäheimo (2009) also challenges Honneth’s focus on the psychological impact of recognition, claiming that it cannot provide the motivational source for social struggles that Honneth assigns to it. Neither Fraser nor Ikäheimo discuss Honneth’s theory of autonomy/social freedom and the issues that arise from his focus on psychological development and self-realisation.

<sup>10</sup> Ikäheimo sees it as vitally important to our constitution as *persons* and hence he embeds this idea in his construction of a perfectionist account of personhood, grounded in three dimensions of what makes us “persons”. In contrast to this aim, I am interested in its relation to what it means to be *free* (which may be part of what makes us “persons”, but this is a distinct issue to the one addressed in this paper).

Importantly, in neither account is recognition's importance reduced to its psychological impact upon our relation-to-self. Rather, they highlight how the recognition of others enables us to inhabit and successfully negotiate the spaces of shared reasons, within and through which we structure and make sense of our actions. This insight forms the cornerstone of the normative authorisation account, which I describe and defend below.

Second, the self-realisation account cannot explain adequately the ongoing relevance of recognition for people's autonomy. If I have received enough recognition, and thus successfully developed my capacity for self-realisation, then it is not clear what role recognition has left to play with regard to my freedom. This is because Honneth's 'developmental approach appears to treat recognition as sort of scaffolding necessary to the construction of personhood, but which then becomes redundant once personhood has been achieved' (McBride, 2013: 139). Consequently, 'it looks as if the real work of recognition is done once the relevant capacities have been acquired' (McBride, 2013: 139). To be sure, Honneth is keen to stress that acts of dis- or non-recognition, most notably forms of physical violence, can shatter a person's autonomy.<sup>11</sup> Thus, he insists upon the enduring need to protect people from misrecognition. Less dramatically, our self-esteem remains sensitive to the positive or negative judgements that people make of our traits and abilities. However, once we have achieved sufficiently-positive relation-to-self, it is not obvious why the recognition of others may hinder or enhance our autonomy. As Kauppinen (2011: 276) notes, 'once people have come to be able to respect and esteem themselves, misrecognition may simply lead them to resent those who do not respect or esteem them rather than prevent them from exercising their autonomy-constituting capacities'. The problem here is that the self-realisation account is

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<sup>11</sup> For a powerful, first-personal account of this, see *Aftermath* by Susan Brison (2002).

too focused on the *development* of autonomy and overlooks the positive role that recognition plays in our subsequent *exercise* of it (McBride, 2013: 141). Again, I expand on this below.

Third, there is a notable lack of struggle between individuals in the recognition exchange as Honneth describes it. This might sound strange, given that Honneth has claimed that ‘each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation’ (Honneth and Fraser, 2003: 186).<sup>12</sup> However, it is notable that Honneth draws from Hegel’s early Jena writings and does not engage with the *Phenomenology*. In particular, Honneth discusses neither the master-slave dialectic, which highlights the deep conflict that characterises many recognition struggles, nor the tradition inspired by this account (e.g. Kojève, 1980). Furthermore, Honneth sees intersubjective struggles for recognition as leading to an ethical resolution in the form of mutual affirmation of people’s respective personalities (subjects “mutually completing” each other). He depicts this resolution as somewhat inevitable, or at least relatively seamless, as it is ‘a moral potential that is structurally inherent in communicative relations between subjects’ (Honneth, 1995: 67). Struggle between subjects is described as ‘a disturbance and violation of social relations of recognition’ (Honneth, 1995: 5), which presents it as a mis-development or pathology of “proper” ethical intersubjective relations (Honneth, 2008). Honneth thus ‘conceptualizes mutual recognition as an originary condition, a pre-existing “nexus” of ethical relations that constitutes the social’, and hence ‘posits struggle as a secondary moment of transgression, or destruction of primary affirmative sociality’ (Petherbridge, 2013: 82). Consequently, ‘although Honneth advocates an agonistic conception of communicative action at the level of social theory, the notion of open and

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<sup>12</sup> He also writes that experience of the three forms of recognition cannot be described adequately ‘without reference to an inherent conflict’(Honneth, 1995: 162).

continuous struggle is somewhat contradicted by underlying assumptions of an “undamaged notion of intersubjectivity” that we can already detect as the underlying presupposition for a theory of recognition’ (Petherbridge, 2013: 32). Indeed, Honneth has acknowledged that ‘I have largely lost sight of the concept of “struggle” in the course of the development of my own theory of recognition’ (Honneth, 2011: 410).

In addition, where struggle does emerge, Honneth depicts it as resulting from the experience of being denied recognition that one feels entitled to or deserving of. In other words, the struggle for recognition is a matter of rectifying a lack or absence of recognition. At best, this captures only part of what recognition struggles amount to. In addition to needing love, respect and esteem, we also struggle with people over the interpretation and appropriateness of norms that structure our actions. In other words, we struggle over our respective authority as normative, interpreting agents (Brandom, 2009: 66ff.). This necessarily involves making a *claim* on others that they recognise our authority and the validity of our assessment of their claims on us. We also struggle *against* people’s recognition, for example by denying that they have understood us or our actions. Finally, recognition struggles involve attempts to *manage* the recognition of others, such as controlling how we present ourselves to them and interpret their judgements of us (e.g. Goffman, 1971, 1990). These are complex normative interactions that are inherent in the exchange of reasons that characterise our lives as rational beings. They are ongoing, open-ended struggles that cannot be reduced to the demand that we be loved, respect and/or esteemed. Such recognition is not about providing something we lack to ensure self-realisation, but rather forms the crux of our everyday normative relations with others.

Fourth, the connection between affirmative recognition and freedom does not seem as tight as Honneth suggests. This is because people can develop robust agency even when subjected to

the pervasive types of non- and misrecognition that he focuses on. As Anderson (2014: 142) observes, people ‘are able to lead evidently autonomous lives despite being denigrated, neglected, abused and disrespected’. One response is to argue that the amount or quality of love, respect and esteem recognition required for a person to become autonomous is very low and hence can be satisfied even in very deprived social circumstances. However, this move is unappealing because it undercuts the claim, central to Honneth’s entire critical theory, that such social circumstances are *unjust* because they contain *inadequate* recognition relations. Given that such circumstances do produce autonomous people, then we cannot charge them with offering insufficient autonomy-generating recognition. This seems to thwart the claim that such situations should be changed in the name of recognition itself (which is a major claim of much recognition politics and a significant part of its appeal).

In voicing this final concern, it could be argued that I am misconstruing Honneth’s account. It is possible that Honneth’s account is intended to be a normative, rather than causal/empirical one.<sup>13</sup> That is, he is outlining the ideal conditions of ethical life, which include freedom-friendly interpersonal relations of recognition,<sup>14</sup> rather than offering an account of what, in actuality, is causally necessary for an agent to become autonomous. Consequently, objections based on empirical counterexamples may challenge the claim that recognition is factually and causally necessary for attaining freedom, but they do not undermine the normative vision of what the “good” society looks like (i.e. a free one characterised by institutionally-secured interpersonal relations of love, respect and esteem). In other words, they do not undermine the validity of the normative account of freedom that Honneth is offering. A free and fair society

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful for an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

<sup>14</sup> For example: ‘The three distinct patterns of recognition... represent intersubjective conditions that we must further presuppose, if we are to describe the general structures of a successful life’ (Honneth, 1995: 174).

*ought* to include these forms of recognition, regardless of whether individuals necessarily require them in order to become/be autonomous.

In response, it can be emphasised that Honneth does seem to be offering an empirical account of self-realisation and social freedom or, at least, an account with a strongly empirical grounding. To quote Kauppinen (2011: 268), ‘Honneth argues that it is an *empirical* matter of fact we can acquire and sustain such attitudes toward ourselves only when others adopt corresponding attitudes toward us’. Honneth himself has indicated the necessity of reconstructing Hegel’s initial thesis ‘in the light of empirical social psychology’ (Honneth, 1995: 68). He suggests that ‘the subjective autonomy of the individual increases with each stage of mutual regard [i.e. recognition]’ and credits Mead for giving this idea ‘the systematic cast of an empirical hypothesis’. (Honneth, 1995: 94). This empirical grounding is also clear from the extensive use he makes of, and the importance he places on, object-relations theory, especially the work of Donald Winnicott (e.g. Honneth, 1995: 38). Honneth (2012: 204) describes how small children’s social process contains ‘various stages [self-confidence, -respect and –esteem]... with the subject’s capacity for autonomy increasing at each stage’. Elsewhere, he claims that, ‘the possibility of the single subject's realizing individual autonomy depends on the precondition of being able to develop an intact self-relationship by experiencing social recognition’ (Honneth, 2004: 358). Finally, as quoted above, he argues that ‘we can only grasp ourselves as being “free” to the extent that we are addressed and treated as such by others’ (Willig, 2012: 148). Consequently, empirical counterexamples do seem to be a problem for his argument (Kauppinen, 2011: 276).

Perhaps, though, Honneth’s account can be recast as primarily normative. This being so, it remains the case that it is an account of what it means to be free/autonomous. Honneth

identifies what he takes to be the relevant conditions of social freedom, namely adequate love, respect and esteem. The problem is that construing this as a normative account leaves one in the position of saying that a person can be denied such freedom-generating recognition whilst, at the same time, being considered free. This renders it questionable in what sense it is an account of what it means to be free. More precisely, it seems to undermine the claim that freedom has an *essentially* social dimension, if one can be considered free whilst lacking this dimension (I return to this point in Section 4). This is not to say that Honneth's conception of the "just" or "fair society, or the dimensions of the "good life", is therefore undermined and hence should be rejected. The idea that institutionalised relations of love, respect and esteem form a valuable component of a just society could may well be right, especially as a corrective to dominant distributive paradigms of justice. Similarly, it is likely that our well-being is strongly correlated with the amount and quality of affirmative recognition we receive. The point is that seeing them as necessary for attaining freedom, or identifying them as constitutive components of freedom, is questionable if people subject to pervasive disrespect can nevertheless develop into free/autonomous agents.

### **3. Social freedom as normative authorisation**

The foregoing discussion suggests the need to rethink the relationship between freedom and recognition. As noted, the concerns with Honneth's theory arise from the psychological, developmental underpinnings of the self-realisation account and its telos of the achievement of an undistorted, positive self-relation. Consequently, we should avoid construing freedom in terms of self-realisation and freedom-constituting relationships as ones in which we "mutually complete" one another via affirmative recognition. To do so, we can utilise an alternative

reading of Hegel, which focuses on our abilities to mutually authorise our status as free agents and our practical reasons for action, rather than on successful psychic maturation. The result is what I term a “normative authorisation” account of social freedom.

The central idea of the normative authorisation account is that a free agent is one who is able to offer reasons for her actions, which can be recognised as appropriate by individuals to whom she justifies herself. This requires that these individuals recognise one another as free and rational agents capable of answering for themselves in the light of justificatory challenges. In other words, free beings are individuals embedded in a shared / social space of reasons, who can engage in justificatory dialogue concerning their actions with, and have their reasons “authorised” by, discursive partners (people one recognises as a fellow reason-giver and reason-taker). Consequently, to enjoy social freedom one must be recognised as having the status of a free agent, i.e. someone who acts on appropriate practical reasons. To be appropriate, the reasons must fit with an agent’s practical identity, that is, her core preferences, desires, projects and the like. In other words, her reasons must be intelligible in the light of who she is.

Like Honneth, the normative authorisation account draws inspiration from Hegel. However, it derives from a significantly different interpretation of his philosophy, one that has been developed by Robert Pippin (2008). Pippin’s contention is that, for Hegel, to be free ‘is ultimately supposed to involve the right sort of responsiveness to norms’, which in turn involves ‘my being able to stand behind them and so “own up to them” in a normative way (to myself as well as to others)’ (Pippin, 2008: 18). Honneth would agree with Pippin’s contention that freedom involves ‘a certain sort of self-relation and a certain sort of relation to others; it is constituted by being in a certain self-regarding and a certain sort of mutually recognizing state’ (Pippin, 2008: 39). However, Honneth is focused on the psychological flourishing of the

individual, achieved through affirmative social relations. In contrast, Pippin's reading of Hegel focuses on one's interpersonally-acknowledged social status as a reason-giver and the intersubjective assessment of one's reasons for actions: 'It is in being successfully recognized as such a free subject, where "successfully" has to do with the achievement of a successful form of mutual justification, that one can then be such a free subject, can thereby come to regard one's own life as self-determined and so one's own' (Pippin, 2008: 209).

Consequently, Pippin (2008: 122) asserts that freedom, 'is nothing but ways of actively holding each other to account by the demanding and giving of reasons for beliefs and actions in a social community'. This means that, 'determining the degree of freedom that can be ascribed to an agent depends... on the kind and quality of the justifications that could be offered and accepted or rejected in a social community at a time' (Pippin, 2008: 143). Hegel's notion of freedom as "being with oneself in the other" is thus interpreted by Pippin (2008: 43) as 'an achievement in practices wherein justificatory reasons can be successfully shared, wherein the basis of my justification of a course of action can be accepted by another as such a reason'. This deviates from Honneth's interpretation of this concept, which is focused on "mutually completing" one another, achieved via the positive affirmation of our respective core personalities. A focus on the normative authorisation of free actions, and hence one's status as a free agent, is absent in Honneth's more Aristotelian reading of Hegel and his concomitant focus on individual self-realisation.

Following Pettit (2001), we can describe individuals who stand in this relation of normative authorisation to one another as "discursive equals" who possess "discursive control". Discursive control denotes 'the interaction that occurs when people attempt to resolve a common, discursive problem – to come to a common mind – by common, discursive means'

(Pettit 2001, 67). In other words, free agents are able to “discourse” with one another; they are able to engage with one another in a turn-taking attempt to resolve a problem through considering relevant considerations or reasons (ibid). A person enjoys discursive control ‘so far as they are engaged in discourse by others, being authorized as someone worthy of address, and they will be reinforced in that freedom so far as they are publicly recognized as having the discursive control it involves’ (Pettit, 2001: 73). In other words, a person is free, at least in part, when she is recognised by others as a discursive partner: ‘When one is actively treated in a discursive manner by others, and thereby recognized as a free person, one enjoys discursive authorization or address. One is taken to be able to entertain and offer reasons that are relevant to the task at hand; and one is effectively treated in the manner appropriate for a fellow reason-taker and a fellow reason-giver’ (Pettit, 2001: 77). People who recognise one another in this way are thus discursive equals and instantiate a relationship of normative authorisation.<sup>15</sup>

There are, then, two forms of recognition operative within the normative authorisation model of social freedom. First, there is the recognition of the agent’s *status*: agents must recognise one another as having the status of free and rational beings. To mutually recognise our status as free agents, we must engage with one another as discursive equals to whom we can make justificatory challenges and responses. Slaves, children and individuals with severe dementia or other severe cognitive impairments are not recognised as having the status of a discursive equal. Women living in a society with deeply-embedded patriarchal norms, in which a wife is seen to be the property of her husband and subject to his will, have their freedom lessened as a result of this reduced social status. Second, there is the recognition of the agent’s *reasons*: the practical reasons that a person can offer to justify her action must be recognisable as appropriate

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relationship between recognition theory and Pettit’s account of freedom, see Schuppert (2013).

for the person in question. In other words, an agent's practical reasons must be such that they can be authorised by competent recognisers. Individuals who make decisions based on severe delusions or who act wildly out of character cannot have their reasons authorised and this renders them less free.

To clarify this account, it is instructive to consider Westlund's example of the deferential wife (Westlund, 2003). This is a woman who treats her husband's interests and desires 'as paramount and organizes her will around them' (Westlund, 2003: 486). She is so deeply deferential that she always reasons about what to do from the perspective of her husband; she automatically defers to *his* preferences and wishes, and hence her decisions as based on *his* practical reasons. This means that her deliberation itself is deferential: if someone were to ask her why she and her husband are, say, moving to a new city, then she could *only* answer in terms of her husband's reasons, which she has adopted fully as her own. Westlund contends that the deferential wife lacks autonomy – and, we can add, freedom – because she lacks the ability to answer *for herself*. Consequently, to be autonomous, one must 'be appropriately dialogically responsive to intersubjective demands for justification. And being appropriately responsive to these demands requires being disposed to hold oneself answerable to the justificatory challenges of other agents' (Westlund, 2003: 502–3). In other words, 'What marks an agent out as self-answerable is how receptive she is to the critical perspectives of others' (Westlund, 2009: 37).

Westlund writes of the "disposition" to hold oneself answerable. This highlights an important point: in speaking of the importance of engaging in justificatory dialogue, we should think of this first and foremost as a capacity.<sup>16</sup> Autonomous agents are *capable* of answering for

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<sup>16</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

themselves. I need not, at every moment, be required to justify myself to others. However, it must be the case that I am *able* to answer for myself with reasons that are my own, which requires that there are people to whom to these reasons can be offered (i.e. people who recognise me as answerable for myself). Furthermore, it is plausible to hold that people who do justify themselves to others, especially when making significant life-choices, act more autonomously than those who do not engage in justificatory dialogue. Doing so provides the normative reassurance that we have acted in appropriate ways. It indicates that we have acted on reasons appropriate for the person we are and hence we can “own” or “stand behind” our deeds. As Benson (2005: 108) writes, ‘Autonomous agents specially own what they do in that they are properly positioned to give voice to their reasons for acting – to speak or answer for their acts, or to give an account of them – should others call for their reasons’. To answer for oneself is to “claim” one’s actions as one’s own.<sup>17</sup>

I began this paper by noting Fichte’s insight about the intrinsic connection between recognition and freedom. Although Pippin offers a reading of Hegel’s concept of freedom as mutual recognition, this core framework was prefigured by Fichte in his discussion of the “summons” (Fichte, 2000). Fichte believes that the “I” exists in, as and through activity. Because the “I” does not have intrinsic capacities but instead is produced through action, it cannot be said to be free or self-determining without positing itself as such. Furthermore, it can only posit itself as free if it is able to act in such a way that *counts* as free. Specifically, it is by selecting an end from a set of possibilities, giving reasons for choosing this end, and achieving this end, that I come to see myself as a free, individuated being; that is, a being capable of transforming the world in accordance with its chosen goals. Fichte observed that choosing a goal and giving

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<sup>17</sup> It also enacts a positive feedback loop, insofar as actually justifying ourselves to others enables us to see ourselves as discursive equals and solidifies our status as equals in the eyes of those we answer to.

reasons for this choice (i.e. justifying an action) requires other people to whom one justifies oneself. This is where the summons comes in. The summons thus consists of a subject being challenged by other rational beings to justify its choices or actions (Fichte, 2000: 31). In being asked to justify itself, the subject is treated as a free and rational being; through resolving to act in light of the summons the subject comes to see itself as free and rational. Simultaneously, the summons to engage in free activity by other free beings causes us to posit free beings outside of ourselves (Fichte, 2000: 41). Crucially, this must be a *mutual* process of recognition: ‘One cannot recognize the other if both do not mutually recognize each other; and one cannot treat the other as a free being, if both do not mutually treat each other as free (Fichte, 2000: 42).

The idea of normative authorisation can thus be understood as a form of “summons”, in which an agent makes a *claim on* or *petition to* another agent to recognise their practical agency, which in turn requires that the agent recognise the second party as a competent judge: as a free and rational agent capable of normatively authorising their actions and hence their status as a free being. Normative authorisation is thus a relation of *mutual answerability* in which agents claim, and recognise the other as having, the authority to answer for themselves qua free and rational beings. Along these lines, Benson (1994: 660) has argue that to be autonomous one must have a sense of oneself ‘as being competent to answer for one’s conduct in light of normative demands that, from one’s point of view, others might appropriately apply to one’s actions’. He later refers to this requirement as “taking ownership” of one’s actions, which consists in seeing oneself as having a distinctive authority over one’s conduct (Benson, 2005). Such authority ‘concerns agents’ position to speak for their actions in the face of potential criticisms’ (Benson, 2005: 102). A person such as Westlund’s deferential wife lacks this authority because she is unable to take ownership of her actions. She does not see herself as

able to answer for her actions in the face of questions or criticisms from others and she cannot offer reasons that she claims as her own. Thus, she cannot engage in justificatory dialogue as a discursive equal and her autonomy is reduced as a result.

To conclude this overview, three clarifications should be made. First, in speaking of the free agent as acting on “appropriate” reasons, I mean reasons that accord with her practical identity, that is, her values, beliefs, desires, projects, character and the like. The free agent must have a sufficient sense of who she is and be able to act in ways that are consistent with this. I take this to be relatively uncontroversial: someone who is severely self-deluded or consistently acts out of character (e.g. who is deeply erratic or akrasic) lacks an important aspect of autonomy. At the very least, they are less free than someone who successfully shapes their life around their core values, desires and preferences. Second, the model requires that I receive normative authorisation from discursive partners. These are people who can assess the appropriateness of my reasons for action. For this to be the case, I must recognise them as free and rational beings, with whom I inhabit a shared space of reasons. If I recognise a person as a discursive partner (i.e. a competent judge), then their recognition will matter to me; I recognise them as capable of recognising me.<sup>18</sup> Discursive partners reciprocally authorise one another as free beings. This emphasises the importance of mutual recognition for social freedom and clarifies the form it should take. Third, people can be considered more or less autonomous, depending on how well they satisfy the conditions that comprise it, and hence we should understand freedom and autonomy as coming in degrees. The normative authorisation account identifies a constitutive, social condition of freedom, which can be enjoyed to a greater or lesser extent. There can also be other, non-social conditions, such as an adequate level of critical self-knowledge. However,

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<sup>18</sup> This need not be voluntary. Sometimes we are very sensitive to the recognition of others, despite wanting to be indifferent to it.

the social dimension is non-substitutable, meaning that the less one is answerable for oneself, the less free one is, regardless of the extent to which other conditions are satisfied.

#### 4. Defending the normative authorisation account

When outlining some concerns with the self-realisation account, I suggested that someone could lack Honneth's freedom-generating recognition yet nevertheless be considered free/autonomous. However, the same objection might be levelled against the normative authorisation account. For example, we can imagine a woman living in an extremely patriarchal society, in which she is denied recognition of her status as a discursive equal capable of answering for herself, who nevertheless struggles against her oppressive conditions and hence engages in acts of resistance. Is it plausible to hold that she is non-autonomous because she lacks the required social recognition? If the normative authorisation model asserts that this is the case, then it could be a strong reason to reject it.<sup>19</sup>

Several points can be made in response to this. First, it is rare that people are denied such status recognition altogether. There are likely to be members of the society who do recognise women's discursive equality, even if many others do not. Given that we should think of autonomy as coming in degrees, we can agree that the woman is autonomous *to some extent*. Nevertheless, we can hold that she would be *more* autonomous if she enjoyed greater recognition of her status as a discursive equal. After all, her struggles against her oppressive, patriarchal conditions can be described, at least in part, as a struggle *for* greater freedom. She will be better able to own her actions, to shape her life and to see herself as an independent

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<sup>19</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

agent if she enjoys a more robust and extensive status as a discursive equal. Furthermore, the normative authorisation model is an account of *social* freedom. It can allow that there are other dimensions of freedom. Women in deeply patriarchal societies who are denied recognition of their practical agency may nevertheless exhibit some autonomy traits whilst lacking other aspects of autonomy and hence being less autonomous than they could be. To enjoy a fuller, more robust freedom they must also meet the social conditions set out by the normative authorisation account.

It is also important to highlight that, for an account of freedom/autonomy to be truly *social*, a person's freedom must be *constituted* (at least in part) by external conditions. This is because otherwise there is nothing to distinguish it from procedural, individualist accounts of freedom. Procedural accounts identify the autonomy-conferring property or process to be something internal to the agent, e.g. the alignment between first- and second-order desires (Frankfurt, 1988) or non-alienated, reflective endorsement of one's personal characteristics (Christman, 2009). They thus make no essential reference to other agents or features of the external world when specifying the conditions of autonomy.<sup>20</sup> These accounts can allow, and sometimes emphasise, that the acquisition of the requisite property is causally dependent on social factors (e.g. Christman, 2009; Dworkin, 1988; Friedman, 2003). However, they deny that such social factors are constitutive of autonomy itself. This means that they are weakly, rather than strongly social.

In contrast, a strongly social account sees some part(s) of the external world as an essential condition of autonomy (e.g. Garnett, 2014; Oshana, 2006; Westlund, 2009). In other words,

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<sup>20</sup> Hence, the distinction between proceduralist and relational accounts is sometimes defined as being between internalist and externalist accounts (e.g. Oshana, 1998).

one lacks autonomy – or, at least, an important dimension of autonomy – if this condition is absent. This means that it is possible for a person to be rendered less free, or even unfree altogether, by their social circumstances alone, *regardless* of the individual’s beliefs, desires and actions. As Oshana (2006: 49) argues, an implication of strongly social accounts is that it is possible for two individuals to be identical in terms of their psychological properties, ‘but to differ nonetheless with respect to their status as autonomous beings. This difference is explained in terms of social variance in their social circumstances’ (Oshana, 2006: 49). The normative authorisation account is strongly social insofar as being able to answer for oneself to others, and hence enjoying the socially-recognised status as a discursive partner, is a constitutive component of freedom/autonomy.<sup>21</sup> Someone who does not stand in this relation to others is less free than someone who does, even if they are psychologically indistinguishable.

It is instructive to highlight the contrast here with Honneth’s account, which seems to be only weakly social. Honneth equates self-realisation with autonomy, defining the latter as individual self-determination (2014: 18) and the identification and realisation of our aims (2014: 28). Thus, what it means to be autonomous is to have a certain positive relation-to-self, which requires that we are loved, respected and esteem by others. However, this social condition is not *conceptually* part of being autonomous. If someone could obtain self-realisation without interpersonal recognition, then they would be as autonomous as someone who had enjoyed the affirmative recognition of others. Thus, there is little, if anything, that separates Honneth’s account from procedural accounts that highlight the causal importance of social conditions. As Kauppinen (2011: 274–275) has observed, there is thus ‘a danger of false advertising’ when Honneth writes of “the profoundly intersubjective nature of autonomy” (Anderson and

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<sup>21</sup> As quoted above, Pippin (2008: 39) argues that, freedom ‘is *constituted* by being in a certain self-regarding and a certain sort of mutually recognizing state’ (emphasis added).

Honneth, 2005: 145). Consequently, there is reason to prefer the normative authorisation account insofar as it is strongly social, rather than weakly so. This applies even if Honneth's account is construed as primarily normative, as it still deems interpersonal recognition to be causally, rather than conceptually, connected to individual freedom.

A related set of objections is that the normative authorisation account is too abstract, demanding and/or elusive. For example, it might be seen to require that we constantly justify our every action to others and hence possess hyper-rational powers of reason-giving. If so, then it may seem problematically exclusionary, counting very few people as free. In response, it can be reiterated that the account is first and foremost concerned with the *capacity* to engage in an intersubjective justificatory exchange. Free agents must be able to hold one another answerable and recognise one each other as such, rather than constantly demanding and giving reasons at every moment. Relatedly, the requisite recognition of one another as discursive equals and the attendant justificatory exchanges that constitute the social dimension of freedom need not be done consciously or under that description. In other words, one need not see oneself as acting as an answerable agent, and holding others to account, in order to meet the requirements of the normative authorisation account. Instead, what is required is that people do actually recognise themselves and each other as discursive equals. Thus, one need not be constantly checking to confirm that one is acting autonomously. It is sufficient that one does, in actuality, enjoy this status and acts accordingly.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the mutual authorisation required described by the account is enacted by most of us much of the time, without too much (if any) reflection, effort or struggle. We rarely have any difficulty in justifying our reasons for action and having them recognised as legitimate in our day-to-day interactions. Indeed, this interaction is part-and-

parcel of what Pettit and Smith term the “conversational stance”, wherein ‘we put our beliefs [and reasons] on the line and expose them to the reality test that others represent for us’ (Pettit and Smith, 1996: 430). This is a process in which people ‘authorize their interlocutors and in turn assume authorization by them’ (Pettit and Smith, 1996: 432). The conversational stance is a basic, pervasive feature of interpersonal relations and as such imbues our interactions with one another. A strength of the normative authorisation account is that it captures this common and central aspect of our social interactions: we are normative beings embedded in shared spaces of reasons and we are constantly challenging others’ actions and justifying our own. This is a major reason why social recognition is of ongoing relevance to the exercise of our autonomy. We want assurances from others that our actions are intelligible in the light of who we are (i.e. our practical projects, commitments, values and relationships). Similarly, we are constantly involved in interpreting norms and their appropriateness, and the recognition of others is crucial in receiving the reassurance that we have got it right. Hence, unlike the self-realisation account, the normative authorisation model can explain easily the continual importance of recognition for people’s freedom. It can also accommodate better the complexity of recognition struggles, insofar as they relate to the administration of norms within our shared space of reasons. We want to be recognised as authoritative within this domain and struggle for others’ recognition of our normative competency, which includes managing how we present ourselves to others in order to gain their recognition. Such struggles are not about obtaining the requisite resources for self-realisation, but rather about securing our status as rational agents.

The normative authorisation account can also incorporate the relevance of self-confidence, -respect and -esteem for our autonomy. Rather than being constitutive of self-realisation and hence freedom, these positive self-relations are instrumentally valuable insofar as they can facilitate our ability to engage in the requisite justificatory exchange that demarcates

autonomous agents. In other words, having a robust sense of self-worth, typically fostered by being recognised positively by others, is likely to ensure that one is able to answer for oneself and make claims on others for their recognition, i.e. for their authorisation of one's status as a free agent and the appropriateness of one's reasons for action. However, the cultivation of a positive self-relation is not constitutive of what it means to be autonomous, which is a matter of holding oneself answerable to others for one's actions and having the socially-recognised status of a discursive equal. The normative authorisation account avoids the developmental, psychological claim that affirmative interpersonal recognition is necessary for becoming free. It is thus untroubled by examples of people who seem autonomous despite being denied love, respect and/or esteem. The autonomy-conferring trait is the ability to answer for oneself, not a sufficiently-positive relation-to-self.

A final appealing feature of the normative authorisation account is that it fits well with the concept of epistemic injustice. Occurrences of epistemic injustice harm one as a knower. Specifically, (a) one is not treated as an epistemic equal, because one's assertions are given less credibility than they merit by hearers (typically because the hearers hold prejudicial views about a social group to which one belongs); or (b) one lacks the hermeneutical resources to make sense of one's experiences in ways that allow one to perceive features of one's social interactions or environment as unjust or immoral. This renders one less able, or even powerless, to challenge oppressive relationships, institutions or discourses. These occurrences are unjust because they wrong 'someone in their capacity as a subject of knowledge, and thus in a capacity essential to human value; and the particular way in which testimonial injustice does this is that a hearer wrongs a speaker in his capacity as a giver of knowledge, as an informant' (Fricker 2007, 5). An epistemic injustice undermines a person's dignity; it erodes their status as an epistemic equal entitled to respect as a rational knower (Fricker 2007, 44).

Within the framework of the normative authorisation account, it is clear how a person's autonomy can be eroded by the epistemic practices of society. First, epistemic injustices undermine one's status as a discursive equal. They deny one the requisite recognition of being an epistemic equal, i.e. a rational knower, and hence someone capable of answering for herself. For example, epistemic injustice occurs when one's beliefs and claims are systematically discounted or dismissed altogether in virtue of who you are (e.g. a woman or black). Second, epistemic injustice can prevent one's practical reasons from being recognised as valid. This arises when one's experiences, desires and reasons are subject to hermeneutic injustice and hence dismissed as incoherent. For example, certain discourses of sex/gender – historically common within the medical community – depict trans identities as pathological and indicative of a failure to develop a “normal” sex/gender identity. Within these terms, a person's desire and decision to change their sex/gender cannot be recognised as a rational decision, but rather the expression of a malformed identity or medical condition in need of being cured.

This is not only epistemically-troubling, but, for the normative authorisation account, it is also autonomy-undermining. If part of what it means to be autonomous is that one's reasons can be socially-authorized as appropriate bases for action, then we must attend to the ways that social discourses shape how people's reasons are understood and assessed. In particular, we must examine how social discourses of identity can prevent people's reasons from being recognised as appropriate and undermine our ability to recognise people as epistemic and discursive equals, capable of giving and assessing reasons. Crucially, this suggests that establishing epistemically-just social relations is a condition of achieving social freedom and vice-versa. The normative authorisation model depicts a free society as one characterised by epistemic justice and gives a clear explanation why this is so. This is a strength of the account and

provides further reason to prefer it over Honneth's self-realisation account, even if the latter is construed as primarily normative. At the same time, it can accommodate the instrumental importance of ensuring people develop a positive relation-to-self. Hence, it can retain Honneth's insight that the good society is characterised by institutionally-mediated affirmative social relations of recognition (but it gives a better account of why this matters for people's freedom). The normative authorisation perspective thus offers an inclusive, explanatorily powerful account of the social dimension freedom, which fits well with wider accounts of a just and free society. It can do this because it avoids the focus on psychological development and self-realisation, centring instead on our status as discursive equals able to answer of ourselves through the mutual assessment of reasons for action.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have sought to develop a "normative authorisation" account as a plausible characterisation of the social dimension of freedom, grounded in intersubjective recognition. I have argued that this consists in our recognising one another as discursive equals, i.e. free and rational agents to whom we are able to justify our actions and make justificatory challenges to. Drawing from recent work in relational autonomy, I characterised this as possessing the capacity to answer for oneself. This is a strongly social account, meaning that it is a constitutive condition of being free/autonomous. The less one is recognised as discursive equals and/or the weaker is one's ability to answer for oneself, then the less free one is. I contrasted this model with Axel Honneth's account of social freedom, which focuses on the relations of recognition necessary for people to achieve self-realisation and hence autonomy. I raised several worries about it, which derive from its developmental underpinning and its focus on achieving a

positive relation-to-self. This account fails to explain the ongoing relevance of recognition for the successful exercise of our autonomy and reduces the relevance of recognition to its contribution to our psychic flourishing. It also seems vulnerable to empirical counterexamples of individuals who achieve autonomy despite growing up in oppressive circumstances. Finally, it does not give an adequate account of our interpersonal struggles over recognition, focusing solely on the rectification of absent or insufficient love, respect and esteem.

Rather than being focused on self-realisation, achieved via affirmative social recognition, the normative authorisation account is first and foremost about being recognised as having the social status of free and rational agents (i.e. discursive equals). I highlighted several strengths of this account. First, it avoids the problems levelled at Honneth's account. Second, it captures a basic feature of our social interactions as normative beings, in which we struggle over the interpretation and appropriateness of practical norms. Relatedly, it expresses the fact that we often seek to justify ourselves to others and seek their normative authorisation that the beliefs and reasons we have acted on make sense for the type of person we are. It can also incorporate the instrumental importance of having a strong sense of self-worth. This is not because it is necessary for achieving self-realisation, but rather because it facilitates our capacity to answer for ourselves. Finally, I showed how the account fits well with recent work on epistemic injustice. Securing people's social freedom, construed as normative authorisation, requires ensuring epistemically-just social relations. These are strong reasons in favour of the normative authorisation account. Hence, I suggest it represents the most promising way of conceptualising the social dimension of freedom.

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