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Tolerance or Recognition? What Can We Expect?

Abstract: The last two decades have seen the (re)emergence of the concept of recognition in ethical and political theory. Oftentimes, recognition is seen as a deeper, more developed version of tolerance, without the problems that tolerance purportedly has. We should not “merely” tolerate different individuals, identities and cultures, but recognize them, or so the argument goes. This move from tolerance to recognition is not without its critics. We will outline some of these criticisms and address them with the resources provided by the theory of recognition. We will suggest that while some of the criticisms are unfounded, the move from tolerance to recognition has a number of problems that the critics have correctly pointed out. The relationship between tolerance and recognition is complex: both have their own aims and functions. We will suggest that there are cases—especially ones that involve deep moral disagreements—where tolerance is a more reasonable aim than recognition.

Keywords: tolerance, recognition, oppression, minorities, moral judgment, Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth

Traditionally, disagreements and frictions between various dissenting voices and cultural groups have been addressed by invoking the concept of tolerance. Tolerance is supposed give our political theories sufficient resources to deal with cultural and practical differences between various groups without violence or oppression. Despite the popular and academic interest in tolerance in its various forms, many authors have argued that for this task the notion of recognition is better suited than tolerance. Indeed, many insist that because tolerance involves a negative moral judgment, it is inherently insulting, oppressive or otherwise harmful. These authors suggest that we should replace tolerance with attitudes of recognition, as the latter do not necessarily entail negative judgments but, on the contrary, positive affirmation. So, we would be better off politically and ethically, if we sought to recognize various minorities rather than simply tolerating them.1

The last two decades have seen the (re)emergence of the concept of recognition in ethical and political theory. Sparked by the work of Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth (both drawing from Hegel) and developed by others, this strand of political theory seeks to provide an overarching account of social justice and explain the way in which Western politics has changed after the Second World War. Roughly speaking, we have seen a shift from the politics of universal rights to the politics of specific identities or cultural minorities. The needs and claims of various cultural, racial and sexual minorities have taken the center stage. The theory of recognition is an attempt to formulate a political theory that takes into account this central development.2

1 Various theories of tolerance and recognition are employed to engage issues in theology, religion, politics and ethics. These include, among others, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, religious and ideological tolerance and so on. In this paper, we aim to provide an analysis of these theories in theoretical and conceptual context without addressing particular applications.

2 For an overview of discussion, see Thompson, The Political Theory of Recognition.

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Despite the widespread turn from tolerance to recognition, there are dissenting voices. Some critics insist that the concept of tolerance has its uses and it has certain benefits that accounts of recognition do not have. In addition, they reject the assumption that many recognition theorists make, namely, that recognitive attitudes are somehow deeper and more ethical than tolerance.

In what follows, we will outline some concerns of those who defend tolerance against recognition, especially the British sociologist Frank Furedi, and seek to address these concerns with the resources drawn from recognition theories. We will suggest that many of Furedi’s concerns can be answered by having a sufficiently nuanced account of recognitive attitudes. However, we will also suggest that some of Furedi’s concerns will remain sound and point towards problems in accounts of recognition, or at least their popular, vernacular interpretations. These concerns have to do with how the formation of self-esteem and self-respect is understood and the possibility of recognition becoming oppressive. Also problematic are attempts to adopt recognitive attitudes in cases of significant moral disagreement. We conclude that recognition and tolerance are quite different attitudes, can express themselves in different kinds actions and can easily overlap with one another.

**Tolerance, Old and New**

Let us begin with the general nature of tolerance. In political philosophy, tolerance emerged as a method to deal with the diversity of opinions, beliefs and practices in a country of many different religious groups. The need for such an idea was especially dire after the 16th and 17th century disputes and wars of religion in the aftermath of the Reformation. The “old” version of tolerance (still widely used) draws heavily from the thought of John Locke and J. S. Mill. The “old” tolerance is explicit about the value of the person holding dissenting beliefs or practices. It assumes that all parties are moral subjects, rational actors who have arrived at their convictions via similar cognitive processes. In other words, the presumption is that most people are rational and capable of engaging in a reasonable exchange of opinions. It is further assumed that such open exchanges between diverse opinions benefit the society as a whole.

A number of contemporary accounts of tolerance still resonate with this historical reality. According to standard accounts, three basic conditions need to be met in order for tolerance to be possible. First, there must be an actual disagreement about beliefs or practices between two parties. If there is no such disagreement, there seems to be no reason for one party to tolerate the other. Second, there must be ways in which one party can, if they so choose, hinder or otherwise forbid the tolerated activity. Again, it seems strange to talk about tolerance, if the party that tolerates does not have the means to hinder or control the tolerated activity. Third, despite the possibility to hinder or control, this is not done; instead, the dissenting beliefs and practices are allowed. All these three aspects require rational and moral judgment: there should be reasons to disagree and reasons to allow the other’s practices and beliefs.

But many are now critical of this kind of tolerance. The “new” tolerance, or tolerance-as-recognition, is more interested in identities than beliefs and practices. For example, Anna Galeotti argues that the meaning of tolerance needs to be revised so that “toleration will be conceived as a form of recognition of different identities in the public sphere”, which entails “a semantic extension from the negative meaning of non-interference to the positive sense of acceptance and recognition.” Several others, like Tariq Ramadan, Susan Mendus and Axel Honneth, have expressed more or less similar concerns.

“Old” tolerance is now perceived as a negative attitude that offers to its subjects “mere tolerance”, which necessarily entails negative judgments, that is, reasons for disagreement. Justice requires more

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3 Furedi offers this historical account in his *On Toleration*.
4 This was the view of J. S. Mill (*On Liberty*).
than a negative judgment accompanied by the tolerator’s acceptance of dissenting practices and beliefs. Subaltern groups deserve to have their beliefs and practices affirmed or at least not negatively judged. “Mere” tolerance keeps reminding the tolerated that there is something wrong about them and this is detrimental to their mental wellbeing. The “merely” tolerated are not, in this view, full members of the society, but more like second-class citizens.

These claims have their roots in political theories of recognition. There is no one single account of recognition, as the concept is used in a number of contexts in political and ethical theory. Instead of reviewing this complex literature, we focus on what we take as the best contemporary account of recognition: that of Axel Honneth and his followers and critics. Theories of recognition have their roots in Hegel’s philosophy. For Hegel, politics is not about securing Kantian universal rights but instead about the struggle of individuals and groups to have their specific identities recognized. This struggle drives societies towards equal rights and social justice: in the idea society, all claims for recognition are recognized.

Charles Taylor’s seminal 1994 paper “The Politics of Recognition” is often seen as the starting point for debates about recognition in the English-speaking world. For Taylor, we have seen a shift from politics of universality to politics of identity. His argument is that multicultural societies actually turn out to be oppressive, if they only focus on prescribing legal norms for universal or equal treatment for all. The problem with universal or equal treatment is that individuals and groups all differ from one another: providing exactly the same treatment for all does not guarantee justice. In a multicultural society, it would be preferable, Taylor claims, to move the focus from universal principles of equal treatment to more particular laws and norms to make sure that specific identities and cultural traditions are treated justly.

Axel Honneth’s account of recognition is the most comprehensive and nuanced account to date. Like Taylor, Honneth draws extensively from Hegel, but, unlike Taylor, also from Jürgen Habermas and the tradition of Critical Theory. Honneth’s account of recognition aims to explain how the individual’s psychological development towards healthy self-respect and self-esteem requires recognition and how emotions of injustice and misrecognition drive social conflicts. Honneth’s account is rather nuanced compared to others, as it distinguishes between three types of recognitive attitudes: love, respect and esteem.

Honneth’s central point is that love is a kind of recognition we all need in order to develop into fully functioning moral subjects with healthy self-esteem and self-respect. If we are not loved, the development of our personality is severely impaired. When people’s bodies are, for instance, physically abused or raped, they are deprived of love in the sense of respect. In addition, if a person is subjected to various other forms of non-physical violence, by, for instance, ignoring their basic need for sustenance and security as children, they are disrespected in this particular sense. According to this developmental view, then, adequate recognition precedes or accompanies the development of normal human cognition.

The second component of recognition is what Honneth calls respect. To be respected is to have one’s basic rights as a citizen and as a moral subject acknowledged. Respect in this sense involves that an individual is taken to be “a full-fledged partner in interaction”, a human being with basic aspects of personhood, such as rationality and moral dignity. A person is not properly recognized, if she is treated as a substandard citizen or her claim to moral dignity and personhood is completely denied, like in the case of the person being forced into slavery. For Honneth, this aspect of recognition is mostly conferred to individuals by the state by having laws about basic, universal human rights.

The third component of recognition is esteem. Esteem has to do with one’s achievements and social status. To have one’s basic rights and personhood respected is something that every human being has an equal claim for. In other words, we ought to give everyone recognition in the sense of respect. This does not apply to recognition as esteem, which depends on the particular individual. The object of esteem recognition is a specific achievement or position of the individual, not the individual’s personhood in general. One

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9 For Hegel’s theory of recognition, see Anderson, Hegel’s Theory of Recognition; Williams, Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition.
10 Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”.
11 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition; The I in We.
can be esteemed, for instance, for one's skills in ice hockey or knowledge of political theory. In addition, esteem recognition can be given to individuals because of their culture or identity. Misrecognition in terms of esteem would mean that one's achievements, status, culture or identity is not properly recognized, for instance, when one is invalidly judged as lazy or one is being judged on the basis of a misguided racial or ethnic stereotype.

For Honneth, all these three aspects, love, respect and esteem, are psychologically necessary, especially when we are children, to develop and sustain an autonomous, moral personhood with healthy self-esteem and self-respect. In a very basic sense, then, recognition is a basic psychological need that human beings have. From this premise, Honneth can then claim that misrecognition or lack of recognition is a serious psychological harm, thus making it prima facie immoral. When a person subsequently feels treated unjustly or being misrecognized, this will, according to Honneth, trigger a claim and a movement towards demanding recognition. This in turn requires others to take these claims to recognition seriously. It is this “struggle for recognition” that is, in Honneth’s view, the driving force of social and political justice.

Philosophers Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen have usefully clarified and developed Honneth’s account.12 Their central claim is that recognition and its various aspects can be taken as kinds of attitudes that people have towards each other. Recognition is thus best described as an interpersonal attitude. In the most general sense, A recognizes B when A adopts a set of cognitive, conative and emotive attitudes towards B, where A takes B to be a person.13

On the Ikäheimo and Laitinen analysis, recognition can be distinguished from two closely-related attitudes, identification and acknowledgement, by reference to their objects. For them, recognition is an interpersonal attitude whereas acknowledgement can be directed towards normative entities. We can, according to this analysis, acknowledge norms, principles, rules or claims as valid, reasons as good or bad and values as genuine. Acknowledgement is further distinguished from mere identification. Identification is a basic cognitive act of discernment whereby we sort the entities and objects we encounter into classes without further normative assessment.

Ikäheimo and Laitinen make it clear that recognition is a dialogical attitude, namely, that A cannot successfully recognize B, if B does not acknowledge A as an appropriate recognizer. Furthermore, they emphasise that B must also understand the content of A’s recognition attitudes and acknowledges A’s reasons as good reasons to recognize B. This does not mean that B has to in fact recognize A in the same sense that A recognizes B. It is enough that B is sufficiently interested in A’s recognition and thinks that A is a competent judge, to recognize B. This dialogical notion of recognition rules out the possibility purely unilateral recognition.

Honneth’s theory of recognition has attracted some critical discussion as well. Some critics, not wholly unlike Furedi, reject recognition wholesale and seek other ways to account for social conflicts and struggles and formulate alternative political theories.14 Others claim that although Honneth’s account has some problems, the concept of recognition is nevertheless useful. One central debate was instigated by Nancy Fraser who argued that Honneth’s theory unjustifiably reduces all social struggles to struggles for recognition, while in fact a number of social struggles are not about recognition but about redistribution of goods in the society.15

12 Ikäheimo & Laitinen, “Analysing Recognition”.
13 Attitudes are understood very broadly in the Ikäheimo and Laitinen account. For instance, they reject the claim that recognitive attitudes are necessarily propositional or clearly linguistically expressible. Recognitive attitudes, like love, might very well be implicit or tacit. One critical response to reducing relationships of recognition to attitudes could be that recognition has to do with statuses that we attribute or give to one another. Ikäheimo and Laitinen respond by pointing out that statuses can be, in their view, reducible to attitudes that people take towards one another. If A has a specific status as, say, a police officer, this status can be analysed as a set of attitudes that others (and A herself) take towards A.
14 Brian Barry, for instance, claims that because we are right to ignore cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual differences in liberal politics, all accounts of recognition begin from a false premise. See, Barry, Culture and Equality.
15 See, Honneth and Fraser, Redistribution or Recognition?
What Is Wrong with “New” Tolerance?

Furedi admits that sometimes recognition is indeed the correct attitude: for example, when we speak about the “mere” toleration of racial minorities. But this is not always the case. We must, he contends, distinguish carefully beliefs, practices and people. Old tolerance is directed towards individual practices and beliefs and it assumes that individuals are moral and rational agents. The “new” tolerance, however, claims that it is not enough to think of individuals as moral and rational agents: if we are to respect them properly, we need to acknowledge or affirm their beliefs, practices and identities as well.

Furedi provides a number of reasons why replacing tolerance with recognition or extending our account of tolerance in the way outlined above is a problematic idea and why even if it aims towards something beneficial, it will likely cause more harm than good. We want to highlight four issues.

First, Furedi is concerned that by replacing tolerance with recognition we might end up overriding moral and rational judgment by forcing value judgments upon people. Automatic granting of esteem makes the whole concept of recognition vacuous and void of meaning. If recognition is simply demanded for cases where people are in disagreement, this makes discussion about contested issues impossible. The problem here is that esteem, on Furedi's account, cannot be demanded or required, since value judgments and responses to moral duties are not directly under the volitional control of individuals. There is no valuation without moral and rational judgment and with judgment there is always the possibility of a negative outcome. Things get worse, if esteem is forced legally: if A is prescribed by law to esteem B, this prescription is basically trying to force A to make moral judgments and valuations about B without adequate reasons that A could find compelling.

Secondly, Furedi is worried that truth will become the victim of recognition. Replacing tolerance with recognition contributes to our “culture of victimhood”: not only does it make public discourse increasingly difficult, but it also promotes a way settling disputes that is antithetical to intellectual virtues. Granted, sometimes it is wise and tactful to pay attention to one’s peer’s emotions but putting emotional issues before truth as a general belief policy is vicious, both in epistemic and moral sense. The claim is that if we think of social life only in terms of recognition, we might become unable to form and express our moral, aesthetic and other value judgments. If this happens, we would be left without tools to assess competing claims for recognition.

Thirdly, replacing tolerance with recognition assumes a view of moral agency that is inherently passive. According to Furedi’s critique, theories of recognition tend to assume that individuals are passive receptacles of institutionally mediated recognition or recognition from other people. Without these forms of recognition, the individual will not be able to form and sustain any kind of moral judgments, cultural identity or self-esteem. Not only are individuals passive recipients of recognition coming from outside themselves from institutions, they are also deeply biased and as such are unlikely to be swayed by public discourse and reasoned arguments. The claim that people are deeply dependent on outside recognition could be used, Furedi suggests, to justify morally-problematic actions, such as legally or institutionally imposing some valuations and beliefs or banning or outlawing some voices in the public debate.

Fourthly, although “new” tolerance adopts the moral high ground and represents itself as being sensitive to the concerns of subaltern groups, it might actually be a thinly-veiled abuse of power. Furedi suggests that recognition could be used to silence dissenters with inconvenient messages in an ad hoc manner. The fundamental irony of this is that in pluralist state everyone can claim the status of victim: “Rather than arguments being an exchange and competition of views, many discussions now consist largely of the two sides trying to get each other censored.”

16 Furedi, On Tolerance, 12.
17 These concerns appear throughout On Toleration.
18 See, e.g., Campbell and Manning, “Microaggressions and Moral Cultures”.
19 Furedi, On Toleration, 159.
In Defence of “New” Tolerance

The first of Furedi’s concerns is that recognition can easily become problematic, if it indeed involves an institutional demand to esteem different cultures, identities or minorities. In fact, both Honneth’s and Taylor’s accounts of esteem recognition explicitly state that esteem cannot be demanded or forced for the very reason that value judgments cannot be forced or regulated from the outside. Honneth writes about this in the context of cultural identities and values:

The sort of social esteem that would be entailed in recognizing a culture as something valuable is not a public response that could be appealed for or demanded, since it could only arise spontaneously or voluntarily according to standards of evaluative examination. In contrast to the esteem normatively required by institutionalized merit principle, there is no possibility of normatively demanding the positive evaluation of cultural ways of life. At best we can here speak only of the readiness to take note of the specific qualities of other cultures such that their value can be reexamined.20

Cillian McBride continues by emphasizing that positive esteem recognition cannot be given without actually evaluating the candidate.21 In order for A to esteem B’s cultural identity, A must make positive normative judgments about B’s culture. But with normatively assessing B’s culture, the possibility of negative judgment also necessarily emerges. For the judgment to be genuine and the esteem to be true, it seems that positive recognition cannot be forced or directly prescribed from the outside, not even by the minority culture that seeks recognition. However, there is something that can be prescribed or demanded: that all cultures and identities have an equal chance to be considered and evaluated; in other words, they have equal respect such that they should be considered as viable candidates for esteem.

Given this, it seems to us that Furedi’s first concern is unfounded, at least as it applies to the theory recognition, not its vernacular use.22 At the theoretical level, accounts of recognition indeed acknowledge that esteem cannot be demanded at will or prescribed directly by law. In this sense, moving from tolerance to recognition does not necessarily entail oppression or stifling of public debate.

As far as we see it, Furedi’s second concern is that recognition might end up neglecting moral judgment and public debate altogether. Again, a closer look at theories of recognition reveals Furedi’s concerns mostly unfounded. Although some critics of Honneth have put forward similar criticisms, theories of recognition indeed leave plenty of room for normative assessment of competing claims to recognition.

In order to make this point, let us look at what Ikäheimo and Laitinen say about misrecognition and assessing different claims for recognition.23 According to them, moral judgments are necessary in order to discern what struggles for recognition are legitimate struggles. All claims for recognition do indeed require justification. If members of a certain group feel that they are misrecognized or that they do not get the esteem they think they deserve, it does not necessarily follow that others have a duty to offer this missing recognition to them. Not all claims and struggles for recognition are valid.

In order to judge and assess competing claims for recognition, we must, Ikäheimo and Laitinen claim, assume that there are some truths about B’s personhood that are in principle independent of whether A or B know them. In other words, we must assume some minimally-objective truths about persons and

20 Quoted in McBride, Recognition, 50.
21 McBride, Recognition, 33-34.
22 In his work, Furedi does not distinguish between theoretical and vernacular uses. From the viewpoint of sociology, this is understandable as theories are only as good as their practical applications. Furedi uses UNESCO’s Declaration of Principles of Tolerance (1:1) as an example of how confused the language of tolerance has become: “Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement.” Furedi (On Toleration, 8-9) interprets UNESCO’s principles so that they manifest a sensibility of automatic acceptance and unconditional appreciation of different cultures. In effect, this reduces tolerance to “psychological attitude that conveys acceptance, empathy and respect” at the cost of demand for public critical deliberation and evaluation of these cultures.
23 Ikäheimo and Laitinen, “Analysing Recognition”, 51-56.
their value. The objective feature of these truths need not be fleshed out in terms of some metaphysically necessary Platonic ideas or something of that kind. They write:

As we see it, talking about an ‘objective point of view’ does not as such imply anything else than the minimal sense of objectivism, which we usually take for granted in our moral and political life. We are constantly engaged in struggles for recognition, as well as disputes over recognition and misrecognition, in which we presuppose de facto that there is some (however contested and difficult to find out) fact of the matter as to whether something really is a case of adequate or appropriate recognition or rather one of misrecognition. If, or when, we do not make this presumption, we are in danger of collapsing the distinction between struggles for recognition and strategic struggles.24

We cannot simply take for granted that all demands for recognition in the political and social arena are equally valid. Feelings of misrecognition and unjust treatment may be signs of actual misrecognition or injustice but are not by themselves authoritative. In order to assess the validity of competing claims for recognition, we must take people’s experiences and emotions seriously. We must give them the benefit of the doubt and respect them as equal moral subjects. However, this does not mean that their experiences and viewpoints alone decide whether we are dealing with an actual case of misrecognition or that there is an actual recognition deficit. Feelings and expectations of recognition are subject to all sorts of biases, distortions and indoctrinations as all our beliefs.25

Some constructive critics of Honneth explicitly say that we might have a moral obligation to disregard some claims for recognition. McBride maintains that some quests for recognition might indeed be left unsatisfied and justice could still be done. This might be because of the simple fact that in multicultural societies there could be mutually exclusive struggles for recognition.26 McBride also sees the possibility of cases where there is indeed a lack of recognition or misrecognition but that lack or misrecognition is morally justified. The reason why McBride thinks that Honneth sometimes does not acknowledge this fact properly is his assumption of “recognition deficit”. McBride argues that since most accounts of recognition focus on cases of misrecognition or lack of recognition where the negative psychological effects of misrecognition are severe, they end up implying that we always have a duty to prevent such effects and thus try to fulfil all claims for recognition.27 When we look at cases more generally and are not misled by the assumption that “recognition deficits” need to be automatically fulfilled, we see that “we can legitimately express our disesteem of others, with the result that their self-esteem is damaged. Indeed, we may often find that we are required to do so”28. So, McBride sums up, we need carefully distinguish moral judgments, justice and struggles for recognition.

If the above is correct and recognition indeed allows for negative moral judgments, we must conclude that Furedi’s basic worry is unfounded: recognition does not necessarily lead to a situation in which we must abstain from morally assessing claims for recognition. This, however, pertains to theory of recognition, not in many vernacular ways the theory is being used.

### Unresolved Issues in Theories of Recognition

Furedi’s third concern has to do with claims about moral agency that theories of recognition make. We will suggest that Furedi’s concern here is at least partly warranted: although Honneth himself does not think that persons are simply passive recipients of recognition, his theory (like Taylor’s) could be more clear at this point and they are often interpreted in simplified terms.

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25 Ikäheimo and Laitinen, “Analysing Recognition”, 56. Sadly, we are rather unreliable narrators of our stories. See, Kristjansson, Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology, 57.
26 McBride, Recognition, 34-35.
27 Furedi (On Toleration, 111) calls this “therapeutic censorship”.
28 McBride, Recognition, 104.
According to McBride,

Honneth argues that social recognition, in the form of respect and esteem, is necessary if we are to develop self-respect and self-esteem. It would seem to follow, then, that the experience of slavery and other forms of social death should automatically undermine one’s self-respect: that one’s self-respect, one’s dignity can be destroyed by others.29

Honneth seems to assume that the sufficient psychological states needed to develop and uphold self-esteem, self-respect and a coherent self-identity are constantly dependent upon recognition coming from outside the individual. If this were taken to the extreme, all misrecognitions would be extremely harmful indeed, because they would threaten the psychological integrity of the self quite severely. This way of looking at misrecognition is in line with the “recognition deficit” assumption mentioned above. If it indeed were the case that all cases of misrecognition or lack of recognition pose a serious threat to individual’s self-esteem and identity, it would seem plausible that we would have at least a prima facie duty to offer valid or sufficient recognition.

Against this, McBride wants to suggest that the “recognition-deficit” model makes a number of implausible psychological assumptions. He goes on to give a number of historical examples where individuals have managed to maintain their self-respect in the face of external deprivation of respect and esteem.30 He mentions Primo Levi’s experiences in German death camps and the struggles of slaves.31 The conclusion he draws from these cases is this: although various forms of recognition can be beneficial and important for the growth of self-esteem, self-understanding and self-respect, they are not always necessary. In other words, in many cases of complete misrecognition or lack of outside recognition, people can still maintain the required level of self-respect and self-esteem for moral autonomy and personhood. This is because basic respect does not completely depend on external conditions. He writes:

I can retain my self-respect in the face of public assaults upon my dignity because my self-respect does not depend on other’s reactions to me, but on my ability to recognize myself in the light of moral standards which I bring to bear upon my own conduct.32

In this view, self-respect is based on a kind of “self-judgment”; I have moral standards against which I judge myself. I can be pressured by external circumstances and other people to go against my own moral standards by making it almost impossible for me to follow them. Further, the specific moral standards I have are of course to some extent dependent on other people: we get our moral codes from others. Nevertheless, McBride maintains that, ultimately, my self-respect is up to me; it is my judgment of my own moral worth that counts the most, not the external circumstances.

We are sympathetic towards McBride’s view and agree that beginning from the assumption of “recognition-deficit” lacks proper nuance. However, it is not clear that Taylor and Honneth actually lack such nuance. Here we should distinguish carefully between different aspects of recognition and their contribution to the individual’s wellbeing. For Honneth, recognition as love is the most fundamental: not being loved and nurtured as child will permanently damage the individual. But if a person has had the opportunity to enjoy love as a child, the person will be more resistant to misrecognitions, disrespect and disesteem later in life. Such a person can indeed uphold her self-esteem even when she is not constantly recognized by others, or even in circumstances that are severely detrimental to one’s esteem. Thus, we suggest that McBride’s views might not be so different from Honneth’s as it might first seem. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind McBride’s main point: we should not begin from the assumption that our self-respect

29 Ibid., 64.
30 Ibid., 64-66.
31 The Jewish psychiatrist, Auschwitz inmate and subsequent creator of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl also addresses similar issues. According to Frankl, in the grueling conditions of the concentration camp, individuals who lost their self-respect and purpose in life perished quickly regardless of their physical fitness. However, Frankl maintains that self-respect and meaningful life are choices that are up to the individual to make no matter how bad the circumstances are. See, Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.
and self-esteem always depends on others. Such an assumption would indeed lead into too simplified and one-sided accounts of moral agency. We might end up becoming, as Furedi suggests, overly sensitive and protective of people’s feelings of self-respect.

Finally, we will address Furedi’s fourth concern that has to do with recognition and abuses of power. Defenders of recognition claim that while tolerance can easily become (or simply is) oppressive, recognition does not have this problem. In other words, the move from tolerance to recognition will significantly lower the risk of unequal or otherwise problematic power relationships. Here we find ourselves mostly agreeing with Furedi’s concern: as many critics of Honneth have pointed out, attitudes of recognition can be hijacked by those in power to defend their agenda. Obviously, many critics of tolerance discuss cases where tolerance has been used in unjust and oppressive ways, but if Furedi and others are correct, as we suggest, recognitive attitudes are no better off than tolerance: recognition can become a thinly-veiled abuse of power as easily as tolerance.

Let us first look at the argument that tolerance is oppressive. Rainer Forst distinguishes two kinds of tolerance: permission tolerance and respect tolerance.33 On the permission account of tolerance, tolerance is a state between a majority and a minority. The majority will permit the minority to have their beliefs and practices but only inside legal and moral limits prescribed by the majority. Forst uses the example of the Calvinist Hugenots living in Catholic France after the Edict of Nantes in 1598. The general rule was that the king, in this case, a Roman Catholic, would determine the religion of the nation. To this rule an exception was made: the Protestant minority was permitted to exist and their safety protected by law, but they were condemned to live in their own enclaves. So, according to Forst, permission tolerance is “a relation between authority and a dissenting, ‘different’ minority (or various minorities). Toleration means that authority gives qualified permission to the members of the minority to live according to their beliefs on the condition that the minority accepts the dominant position of the authority.”34

This kind of “official” tolerance, Forst argues, is indeed “insulting” and can easily be unjust (and, it must be noted in this case, is maintained at the whim of those in power, as seen in the revocation of the aforementioned ‘tolerance’ by the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1685 by Louis XIV).35 For one, it is the majority and their authority that gets to define the limits of the minority’s beliefs and practices and thereby doing effectively making the minority second-class citizens. So it is the majority (be that the king or the democratic authority) that determines what the disagreements are, what kinds of reasons there may be to accept and legitimize the disagreements and what kinds of beliefs and practices are out of bounds.

Forst’s idea of respect tolerance comes closer to recognition. On the respect account, all citizens of a democratic community respect each other as legal and political equals, but nevertheless can have reasonable disagreements about the value of various practices and beliefs. In this view, tolerance requires that the disagreeing parties acknowledge or respect each other as equal moral and rational subjects while disagreeing on some particular issues. Forst is suggesting that respect tolerance is possible only when we commit ourselves to some universal moral norms and principles about the equal treatment of persons. Opposed to permission tolerance, in respect tolerance the various reasons involved in the acceptance component of tolerance are based on some general or universal moral framework that both parties share (at least to some extent). In other words, two parties can disagree about something by invoking their idiosyncratic reasons but they must justify their acceptance (or rejection) on some grounds that both sides more or less accept.

We see no reason why recognitive attitudes could not be unjust and oppressive in exactly the same way as permission tolerance. In other words, the problem of unequal power relationships that beset permission tolerance also applies to recognition. McBride agrees and argues that

The traditional ‘permission’ model of toleration gave rise to concerns about the power relations between the tolerator and the tolerated, but it is clear that this underlying issue about inequalities of power will not be dispelled by moving from toleration to some notion of particular recognition, for the same relationships are in evidence here too. The more

33 Forst, “To Tolerate Means to Insult”.
34 Ibid., 219.
powerful will assume the authority to extend recognition to the other, to welcome them into the circle, but this same gesture only serves to reaffirm the unequal position of the two parties. If anything, the recognitive version of this relationship is more problematic because the weaker party in toleration relationship is only demanding freedom from interference, whereas the recognition model assumes rather that the weak desire the affirmation of the strong, without considering whether this desire might be not already be a product of their unequal relations and a means to confirm subordination.36

Even when we think in terms of recognitive attitudes, the danger is that the recognizer “hijacks” the reasons and terms under which the other party is recognized (as in permission tolerance). As a result, the identity of the recognized party becomes too tightly scripted. For example, Keenan Malik points out how multicultural policies in Birmingham in 1980s ultimately failed because “…the city council’s plan effectively assigned every member of a minority to a discrete community, defined each group’s needs as a whole, and set the various organizations in competition with one another for city resources. And anyone who fell outside these defined communities was effectively excluded from the multicultural process altogether.”37 What is the point of treating people first and foremost as a member of distinct race, if within one race you have individuals from a number of mutually exclusive political parties and religious outlooks? For example, an Iraqi muslim living in Finland can have more politically in common with his Lutheran Finnish colleagues than with his “own” in the Muslim community.

Furthermore, there seems to be no guarantee that the same power relations that make some forms of tolerance unjust will not make some forms of recognition similarly unjust by simply maintaining the unequal status quo. McBride puts this worry elegantly by saying that the desire to be recognized is seductive and this seduction can lure us into complicity with our own oppressors. We can, for instance, be mistaken about our need to be recognized by some majority that imposes false conditions on our relationship.38 Seeking recognition from this majority would then be much worse than simply demanding to be tolerated, because it would involve recognizing the majority as a competent recognizer and a legitimate source of recognition thereby supporting the underlying misrecognition. This insistence on mutuality highlights the difference between tolerance and recognition. Because tolerance can express itself simply as an inaction and disregard towards the tolerated, it might have some moral and political benefits over recognition, which always entails some kind of mutual, positive action between the two parties. We will take up to topic in more detail in the final section of the article.

Why Recognition Cannot Replace Tolerance

Let us summarize what we have argued above. After examining Furedi’s first and second concern, we found them mostly unjustified insofar as they are directed towards the theory of recognition. In principle, the theory of recognition does not necessarily rule out moral debate, impose moral judgments on people against their will or end up contributing into “culture of victimhood”. We also concluded that Furedi’s third concern is partly unjustified but might have some truth to it. At least we should not emphasize the moral heteronomy of the individual too much. The fourth issue that Furedi flags, namely the issue of unequal power relationships, we find as problematic as Furedi. Where does this leave us with tolerance and recognition? In what follows, we highlight the differences between tolerance and recognition and suggest some reason why one cannot simply replace the other.

36 McBride, Recognition, 39–40.
37 Malik, “The Failure of Multiculturalism”. For example, think of instances in which members of an identifiable social minorities oppose ‘Affirmative Action’ initiatives presented as corrective, or, a progressive leftist woman who opposes abortion, a homosexual who opposes the same-sex marriage, a pacifist veteran, an atheist who thinks that religions are the force for good in the world, a working class person who votes for austerity measures, and so on.
38 Slavoj Žižek has made similar claims that achieving a position where one can confer recognition or display one’s capacity for tolerance is a moral commodity, a way to gather social capital and esteem. Tolerance can, thus, be used to promote the status of the tolerator and simultaneously treat the tolerated in ways that harms her identity. More precisely, the tolerated are used as means to gain a certain kind of public glow. See, Pound, Žižek, 96-97, 134-137.
There are clear discontinuities between tolerance and recognition. First, the object of recognition is different from the object of tolerance. In the standard account of tolerance, what is being tolerated is a practice, belief or a conviction. It is meant to say nothing about the value of the individuals engaged in these practices and beliefs. Indeed, the assumption built into "old" tolerance is that all individuals are morally and rationally autonomous subjects. To put the point in the language of recognition, tolerance entails an aspect of basic respect. Recognition is a much more complex attitude in terms of its objects. Love is directed towards the person as a whole regardless of the person’s capacities or characteristics. Respect takes the person as a morally and rationally autonomous agent. Esteem is directed towards the person's social status, achievements and specific features like culture and identity.

Given the panoply of possible different objects, we ought to pay more attention to what we tolerate and the objects of our recognitive attitudes. Oftentimes race, political or religious beliefs, ideological practices, sexual orientations, cultures and identities are treated alike without good reasons. One’s racial background is involuntary and is quite different from one’s political convictions. Cultural practices (which are every now and then debated in public) such as cockfighting, peyote smoking and circumcision are clearly different from the two previous issues. The suggestion that we might have one abstract principle to deal with all these different issues seem rather far fetched in our view. In addition, it is crucial to draw a distinction between the person and person’s thoughts, words, and actions. While the former more easily falls under the concept of respect, tolerance (or esteem) is more suitable in the latter case.

The second difference between recognition and tolerance is that recognitive attitudes require a certain level of mutuality, whereas tolerance does not. A adequately recognizes B only if B acknowledges that A is a competent recognizer in the relevant respect and understands the content of A's attitudes of recognition. None of this is needed for tolerance, as A can tolerate some of B’s practices or beliefs even if B does not acknowledge A at all.

The third difference is connected to the second one. Tolerance and recognition are quite different in terms of the kinds of actions they might entail. As tolerance partly consists of refraining from harmful or negative actions towards the tolerated, tolerance can often be expressed by not taking action. In other words, the attitude of tolerance can easily express itself as a simple inaction. Recognition does not work in the same way, because it always involves some act of granting or giving love, respect or esteem. The recognizer and the recognized both act on the basis of their recognitive attitudes: the recognizer offers esteem, love and respect and the recognized acknowledges the recognizer. This difference between the kinds of actions involved in recognition and tolerance also play out in misrecognition and intolerance.

Forms of misrecognition and lack of recognition can be seen as forms of inaction: they do not take the other person into account in the proper way. Tolerance is compatible with disregard, whereas proper recognition is not. Unlike recognition, intolerance always expresses itself in the form of some action whereby one seeks, in way or another, to control the beliefs or practices the other person.

39 On tolerating cockfighting, see Bowlin, “Nature, Grace, and Toleration”.
40 We realize that this distinction is far more complicated issue than what could be treated in the limits of this article. So far the best theoretical treatment, in our view, is Smith, What is a person?
41 We would like to thank our anonymous referee for making this point very clearly.
42 There could perhaps be another difference that has to do with the kinds of emotions that are compatible with tolerance and recognition. On a superficial take, it might seem that tolerance is compatible with all sorts of negative emotions, like hate, dislike and disgust, whereas proper recognitive attitudes are incompatible with A strongly hating or disliking B. Things, however, might be not as simple as this. First of all, we have to distinguish between the different aspect of recognition. It seems plausible that love is not compatible with actively hating or despising the individual in question. It might, however, be possible to dislike some practices or tendencies of an individual and love them at the same time. Respect might also be compatible with having a host of negative attitudes towards the recognized individual. Furthermore, on Honneth’s account, respect is mainly provided by laws and other lawlike norms. So insofar as I respect another person's rights as a moral and legal subject, I can hate or dislike that person as much as I want. Indeed, it would seem that strong negative moral emotions actually presuppose that the object of those emotions is a moral subject. Thus, hate, for instance, could be seen as only an interpersonal emotion. Finally, some forms of esteem also seem to be compatible with strong negative emotions. It seems plausible that I should be able to provide proper esteem to a smart and hard working colleague even if I strongly dislike or hate her because of her other features, such as her narcissistic character.
Given these differences between the kinds of actions they can entail, it is easy to see why tolerance and recognition are not on a spectrum so that recognition is simpliciter something better than tolerance. One can esteem, say, the particular identity of some ethnic or minority group while at the same time being intolerant towards some of their practices. Imagine that there is a group of people holding that only men are allowed to have university education. We could, we contend, respect and hold in esteem the individuals in this group and their identity, while maintaining that this particular way to treat women is morally wrong. We could, if we wanted to, pressure or otherwise hinder such practices but we do not. In this sense, recognition and tolerance are clearly two different attitudes and can result in different kinds of compatible and incompatible actions.

Finally, following Furedi and McBride, we suggest that serious problems will arise if we play fast-and-loose with the claims for recognition. In many cases—especially ones that involve deep moral disagreements—a state of mutual esteem is almost impossible to achieve. In such cases, tolerance is a more preferable attitude; sometimes intolerance is the most moral option. Esteem is a reasonable goal only when there are shared networks of normative assessment, that is to say, when the opposite parties are already rather close to one another in terms of basic moral norms and precepts. Such conditions hold, for example, between various Christian churches and some political parties.

However, mutual esteem might turn out to be too ambitious a goal in cases where the two sides disagree about the moral nature of the centerpiece of the disagreement. This is especially the case when the practice or activity disagreed upon is part of the individual’s identity. Consider the practice of circumcision in Judaism, for example. For the critics, this practice is unhealthy and violates the basic rights of the infant, so it should be outlawed. It entails a lack recognition in all three senses: love, respect and esteem. For the practitioners, it is not a moral issue at all. Instead, it is about belonging to a particular group. It is exactly via circumcision that one becomes a recognized member of the group. Here the issue is rather complicated: if circumcision as a practice is not tolerated, it seems to the practitioners that they are denied proper esteem. Practicing circumcision is so part of Jewish identity that taking an attitude of esteem towards them would necessarily involve seeing circumcision as a morally neutral or positive practice. There seems to be no way to reach mutual recognition between parties without first dissolving the moral disagreement. In such cases, esteem is not a reasonable goal and we should aim for tolerance instead.43

This point applies more generally to religious practices and religious identities. Contemporary accounts of the evolution and psychology of religion suggest that religious thinking and behavior have a central role in building mutual trust and enhancing cooperation in human groups. Religion, it seems, has a special power to bring people together and give humans a sense of belonging. Indeed, this might have been the most central evolutionary function of religion.44 As a consequence, religious identities are often experienced very strongly and deeply. Religion achieves this strong sense of identity by propagating shared beliefs that bear significations relative to different domains of practical life (morality, public behavior, etc.) and by having people perform rituals and acting in certain ways. Sharing rituals, moral norms and other practices become central to a person’s identity. Thus, religious practices and identities become somewhat special: practices such as circumcision are so central to a person’s identity that negative moral judgement of them almost inevitably is interpreted as disrespect. This explains how religious practices become objects of public moral debate more easily than some other practices. All this emphasizes the point we made above: in cases of moral disagreement about practices central to religious identities, esteem recognition might be too demanding of a goal.

We also want to point out, following Forst, that “old” tolerance implicitly contains many aspects of “new” tolerance.45 “Old” tolerance, for instance, begins from the basic assumption that individuals are morally and rationally autonomous. So both recognition and tolerance assume at least a minimal shared

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43 Edward Langerak has discussed the conditions and ethics of moral disagreements in a civil society in his Civil Disagreement: Personal Integrity in a Pluralist Society.

44 Ara Norenzayan offers an accessible and comprehensive look into these theories in his Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict.

45 See also Vainio, “Virtue of Tolerance.”
moral, normative framework. Public debates about tolerance are usually about the kinds of reasons that constitute morally permissible disagreement and variance; in other words, we debate and discuss the general moral standards according to which we accept or reject some practices and beliefs. This is only possible if it is undergirded by a shared moral conviction that we are all moral and rational individuals that have a claim for equal respect.

The benefits of the theory of recognition are best seen in cases such as race, but as soon as we step outside this issue, we need to start using our moral judgment, that is, asking and giving reasons—and take the risk of being judged negatively. Nevertheless, the theory of recognition can provide us a way to better understand disagreements in cultures and countries where there are mutually incompatible practices and beliefs. Recognition does not give us solutions to our disagreements or offer substantial, practical scenarios that we can easily put into practice. Instead, it could help us to better conceptualize our disagreements and to identify the factors that contribute to such disagreements.

References