Reimagining Recognition:

The Natural Environment as a Personified Actor and Subject

While environmental sustainability is an increasingly important issue, there is much disagreement among scholars regarding how the ‘green movement’ ought to be framed. That is, can we define the move toward environmental sustainability in terms of individual self-interest or is a more nuanced approach needed if we are to transform our value system at the societal level? As John M. Meyer and Michael Maniates (2010) point out, many political scientists make the “business case” for what drives environmental progress and sustainable practices (2). The “business case” is synonymous with a Hobbesian-style of human nature and Lockean perspective of individualism in which the main drivers of societal transformation are grounded in the self-interest of actors. This argument would involve making ‘green’ products profitable and assumes that individual-level buying behavior can somehow create an ecologically-minded politics. The “business case” is similar to the reductionist model of ‘economism,’ indicating that answers to all social and environmental problems can be found in the economic sphere.

I argue here that not only is the “business case” and ‘economism’ detrimental to an environmental sustainability movement, but that there are alternatives to this self-interest model. The alternative model I propose focuses on a normative context which entails a transformation of the value system within society (Maniates, Meyer, and Liften 2010; Gillroy 2000). This transformation has the potential to create a new self-interest predicated on a mutual dependency between persons and the natural environment. As I discuss, Axel Honneth’s (1995) three levels of recognition provide a good framework from which to establish a new societal conception of the human-environment relationship, however, this requires a problematization of the politics of recognition. Although the politics of recognition typically involves interpersonal relationships between individuals, groups and structures within society, a disembodied form of recognition can occur when a societal value system transforms to incorporate the natural environment from which we share a mutual dependency.

I ask how a societal value system that acknowledges the natural environment as a symbiotic actor and mutual agent can be established. For this task, I analyze Axel Honneth’s (1995) three levels of recognition in part I, employing them as a framework for understanding how patterns of recognition can potentially create a platform for self-environment relationships. More importantly, I will move beyond Honneth’s three level framework to add a fourth realm where a disembodied form of recognition takes shape as we begin to incorporate the environment through an understanding of symbiosis between persons and ‘nature.’ This will help create a more nuanced theory of recognition. In part II, I compare and contrasts Julie Connolly’s (2015) recommended fourth level of self-realization as it relates to and strengthens the self-environment relationship proposed here. Connolly’s insights are useful for determining what elements a fourth level might add to a politics of recognition more broadly. Although Connolly focuses on self-acceptance as an ultimate goal, self-environment relationships set the stage for a path toward self-sacrifice as a shared societal value (Maniates, Meyer and Liftin 2010). As I explain in Part III, self-sacrifice does not necessarily entail a loss, but it will become clear that there is much to gain from the kind of self-sacrifice described here. Finally, I ground human-environmental relationships in a philosophy of ecology as extrapolated by John Martin Gillroy (2000) in part IV. Gillroy’s account of ethics as it relates to the natural environment not only has implications for the fall of the ‘economism,’ but also for the broader success of an environmental justice movement in terms of a politics of recognition.

**Part I. Honneth’s Three Levels of Recognition**

Building on Hegel’s earlier work, Axel Honneth (1995) lays the socio-psychological foundation for three levels of recognition in society. These three levels of recognition include love relationships between individuals, legal relationships between individuals and the state, and an intersubjectively shared value horizon born out of solidarity between members of society. While Honneth’s typology provides a concrete analysis for understanding the underlying pattern of recognition within society, it is limited to human persons. Although Honneth acknowledges mutual dependence as a feature of his three level framework, his scope focuses only on the processes between people and their material self-constructions. In order to develop a new understanding of disembodied recognition, it is first necessary to outline Honneth’s three levels of recognition and analyze how they might fit in with and even encourage the broadening of recognition to include the natural environment.

*LOVE RELATIONSHIPS*

To begin, Honneth (1995) outlines the fundamental attributes that are born out of love relationships at the first stage of recognition. Honneth makes clear that it is through “emotional relationships with other persons” that children “learn to see themselves as independent subjects” (97). Honneth emphasizes symbiosis in his analysis of love relationships between people, relying on Donald W. Winnicott’s object-relations theory as a foundation from which to build the argument that infants and young children are not independent of their caregivers (98). In fact, young children rely on their caregivers so much so that recognition becomes entirely dependent on this relationship. In this way, mutual dependency and symbiosis serve as the vehicle by which one eventually comes to understand their individual propensity for recognition in larger society. Remarkably, in this first stage, the caregiver and child are dependent on each other to the extent that they are “incapable of individually demarcating themselves from each other” (99). The above account of symbiosis through love relationships is how a mutually dependent relationship with the environment might function in two different respects.

In the first instance, the sort of symbiosis that Honneth explains is not, for all intents and purposes, different from the relationship that people have with their natural environment. Just as infants rely on their mothers or fathers to nurture and provide for them, so too does humanity rely on the environment for its survival. When framed in this way, it is not surprising that we often refer to the natural environment as ‘Mother Nature.’ Not only does a mother “learn to adapt her care and concern” to her infant’s changing circumstances and requirements, but her concern signifies a continuous process of adjustment (Honneth 1995, 99). Much like a mother is the environment’s capacity to nurture, sustain, and adapt to human necessity and consumption patterns. In this way, the environment is malleable in the same way that humans are willing to adapt within their own embodied relationships with each another. While the notion of ‘Mother Nature’ may be fraught with ill-conceived notions regarding the role of women as caregivers, there is value in anthropomorphizing ‘nature.’ Jane Bennett (2010) explains the importance of anthropomorphism at length:

An anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchal structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of ‘talented’ and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self). A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture,’ anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms (99).

In Bennett’s view, anthropomorphizing provides a conceptual tool that enables us to perceive the experience of nonhumans as similar to those of humans. From this vantage point, we can begin to understand how we are inexorably connected to ‘nature.’ If we attribute human qualities to nonhuman things, we can step outside our supposed uniquely subjective human experience while instilling a sense of equality between people and things. Nonhumans, recognized as actors in themselves, and as vital participants in identity formation, further promote a flattening out between humans and nonhumans that can create an ecologically aware disposition. When we perceive ourselves as similar to rather than distant from nonhuman entities, we are in a better position to care for the well-being of ‘nature’ and understand ourselves as situated within it.

Second, there is another important point here involving the circumstance of the infant and the environment. On the one hand, children are unable to communicate their needs effectively and consequently, they rely on the “supplemental assistance of a partner in interaction” (Honneth 1995, 99). Like a child, the environment is constrained by its capacity to speak on its own behalf and relies on the concern of people both individually and collectively for its protection. This is why self-sacrifice is a key component in self-environment relationships as explained in Part III below. Unlike the child who grows to eventually detach from his or her symbiotic relationship, the environment is stuck in a perpetual state of infancy. Thus, although the environment is often perceived as the ultimate caregiver to humanity, it is also—and perhaps more importantly—an entity which requires the most protection.

Further, the love relationship serves as a confidence-builder and springboard for public life. Yet, the implications for a self-environment relationship are unique because they do not fulfill Honneth’s requirement that love relationships must eventually beget “a cognitive acceptance of the other’s independence” (107). Here is the divide between an embodied, rational critical dependency among persons and the relationship that forms when the environment as a disembodied actor enters into a state of mutual recognition with individuals and society. Where Honneth’s actors come to understand their individuality through close relationships, the environment is certainly capable of existing on its own. That is, it is because the natural world is self-sustaining that it need not require recognition without the presence of humanity. It is only through the presence of humanity that the environment demands recognition solely because humanity is forever dependent on it. Therefore, the environment, in its infancy, is also in a constant state of symbiosis with humanity. Because of this reality, the second, legal stage of recognition affords rights to the environment which are both directly and indirectly related to the rights of individuals.

*LEGAL RELATIONSHIPS*

The legal foundations that imbue individuals with self-respect in society fits in well with self-environment relationships, but the inclusion of a disembodied actor at this stage of recognition further complicates the hierarchal structure of legal recognition. Honneth points out that it is through the legal protections of the modern state that humans are granted equal rights and individual autonomy (110). Indeed, it is through the acknowledgement that each person is equal under the law that individuals achieve reciprocal respect from each other. Because individuals and the environment are in a constant state of symbiosis, respect for the environment ought to flow naturally from legal relationships between people. Honneth credits universal human rights with the formation of legal structures that enable individuals to have an equal footing in societal relations (111). Yet, the practical application of universal human rights is not always satisfactory as there is an underlying hierarchal structure that first dictates what personal characteristics are valued in society. This value characterization is what Honneth calls “social esteem,” which exists outside of legal recognition (113). Social esteem is a practice whereby individuals are first appraised by each other according to the Kantian notion of rationality and moral attitudes (113). In this way, people decide what characteristics are worthy of being legally protected depending upon cultural attitudes and aesthetic styles. While it is unclear whether legal protections themselves can influence cultural attitudes in Honneth’s argument, it may be possible that recognizing the environment as a rights bearing entity can reinforce ecologically-conscious cultural attitudes. As it currently stands, the legal realm is not an adequate mechanism for environmental recognition as there is no established conceptual link between humans and the environment as symbiotic actors.

On the one hand, if society separates itself from the environment in effort to recognize it as its own entity, the practical application of value will risk being overshadowed by human-centered forms of recognition. That is, humans already rank themselves at the top of the hierarchal order of society, and are a dominating force over nature in the western tradition. There is no reason to believe that this would change if the environment were to suddenly become an entity worthy of legal recognition. The environment would inevitably come second when dictating political, economic and legal protection. To escape this dilemma, individuals and society must understand the environment in terms of a symbiotic and mutually dependent relationship. The legal framework that accompanies this symbiotic relationship can be understood through human rights language which is already established.

The symbiosis between individuals and their environment is evident in the language of human rights in international law. For example, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR 1948) outlines access to food as a core human right. General Comment 12 (1999) of the ICESCR states:

The notion of sustainability is intrinsically linked to the notion of adequate food or food security, implying food being accessible for both present and future generations. The precise meaning of “adequacy” is to a large extent determined by prevailing social, economic, cultural, climatic, ecological and other conditions, while “sustainability” incorporates the notion of long-term availability and accessibility (Article 7).

The above passage speaks to the mutual dependency between individuals and their environment. Specifically, the language of sustainability hints at the need to balance human necessity with the preservation of ecosystems. Humankind and their corresponding ecological environment are inextricably linked. Only with the acknowledgement of this symbiotic relationship can an intersubjectively shared value horizon provide the foundation for a sustainable environmental justice movement.

*INTERSUBJECTIVELY SHARED VALUE HORIZON*

Honneth’s explanation of a shared value horizon in the third stage of recognition gets to the heart of how values and social norms shape what individuals deem important in their collective societies. The shared value horizon exists as a space where prestige implies the “degree of social recognition the individual earns for his or her form of self-realization” that contributes “to the practical realization of society’s abstractly defined goals” (126). In this case, cultural attitudes and aesthetic styles matter. While Honneth concedes that value systems are a space for conflict and social upheaval, he is hopeful that solidarity movements are able to form through their respective social groups (129). The incorporation of a human-environment and societal-environment level of recognition has the potential to overcome intergroup conflict because it provides a common space from which humanity shares a mutual concern and symbiotic dependency.

The symbiotic relationship between individuals and their environment has further implications for Honneth’s intersubjectively shared value horizon as it relates to freedom and autonomy. Honneth argues that we must move beyond a basic conception of Kantian morality into a “form of trust directed inward, which gives individuals basic confidence in both the articulation of their needs and the exercise of their ability” (174). Here Honneth diverges from Kant’s philosophy as he does not stop at achieving moral autonomy. For Honneth, it is necessary to focus on the ways in which self-realization becomes possible through ‘communitarian ethics’ (172). Communitarian ethics takes both love relationships and legal relationships under consideration in recognizing that “freedom associated with self-realization is dependent on prerequisites that human subjects do not have at their disposal, since they can only acquire this freedom with the help of their interaction partners” (174). The notion that true autonomy is born out of mutual interactions and dependencies supports the argument that we must be made aware of our symbiotic relationship with the environment if we are to practice Honneth’s model of a shared value horizon. It is only through the understanding of our connections with each other and our environment that we can begin to fully achieve self-realization and solidarity.

The three level framework outlined above not only provides a platform from which recognition among individuals can be achieved, but demonstrates that it is also a solid and compatible model for the inclusion of a fourth level of recognition. Although a fourth order of recognition is not a new concept, the assertion that individuals and society ought to include a disembodied, mutually dependent actor is a seemingly radical divergence from the anthropocentric oriented forms of recognition often proposed. With that being said, there are still valuable insights to take away from proposed fourth levels of recognition that are human-centric. Specifically, Julie Connelly’s (2015) model for self-recognition and self-acceptance has implications for a self-environment and societal-environment level of recognition as they both relate to an inner psychoanalytic process. In the case of self-environment relationships, this process begins with self-sacrifice and can ultimately help to create the cultural attitudes necessary for a sustainable environmental justice movement to develop.

**Part II. A Fourth Order of Recognition: Partially Disembodied Self-Environment Relationships**

Julie Connelly (2015) proposes a fourth level of recognition that includes self-acceptance as independent of Honneth’s larger societal self-realization process. According to Connelly, “both moral choice and the development of personal narratives, require a degree of individual independence from social norms that is not explored by Honneth’ s theory” (402). Where Honneth contends that it is only through stable structures of recognition within society that individuals can achieve self-realization, Connelly sees room for necessary independence to form when individuals take a step back from larger society and its embedded value systems. This step inward allows individuals to identify themselves within the larger structures of recognition that Honneth proposes. This process is crucial for the realization of the symbiotic relationship between individuals and their environment. It is first through an inner-psychoanalytic process that individuals can understand their unique dependency on the environment. Only then can a larger, societal-environment relationship be realized through a shared societal value of self-sacrifice.

It is precisely because individual identities are not always affirmed by larger societal value systems that a struggle for recognition occurs. Likewise, it is because a closeness with nature is not a dominant societal value in western cultures that inner contemplation is necessary in order to develop the general ethos of a symbiotic relationship with the environment. Connelly agrees that “reasonably coherent and stable identities require greater choice and reflection” (400). Understandably, true freedom and autonomy do not follow from being naïve to one’s situation-specific context, but from an acceptance and understanding of one’s relationship to societal values, or oftentimes, the lack thereof. Moreover, Karen Liftin (2010) explains that “contrary to modernity’s embrace of ‘possessive-individualism,’ self-giving seems to be built into the human condition and correlated with psychological maturity” (124). Thus, the process of self-sacrifice is first and foremost, born out of the ability to reflect on one’s own circumstance. Implicit in the concept of self-sacrifice is Connolly’s description of what self-realization means for the larger context of recognition.

Whereas Connolly’s fourth order of recognition ends with a process of self-acceptance, the model of recognition proposed here entails a disembodied form of recognition that moves beyond the self. In fact, the self-realization process that is to occur in Connolly’s framework calls for autonomy, authenticity, and agency without recognizing the physical vulnerabilities that humans have with regard to their symbiotic attachment to the environment. Including this symbiotic relationship in the process of self-realization has real and lasting effects for Honneth’s intersubjectively shared value horizon. More specifically, once materialized in the individual process of self-realization, self-sacrifice has the potential to permeate the public sphere as a key component of the shared value horizon. This transition plants the symbiotic relationship between society and the environment into a cultural conception of the good life.

**Part III. Self-sacrifice as an Intersubjectively Shared Value Horizon**

Following from self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem is what Karen Liftin (2010) describes as self-sacrifice. Liftin explores self-sacrifice in terms of its positive function in society rather than its limiting and often assumed, negative function. Because of the mutual dependence between the natural environment and society, a degree of sacrifice must be maintained on the part of the individual. Although individual-level sacrifice is needed to maintain this balance, it requires the individual to move beyond him or herself into what Liftin describes as “transcendental social cohesion” (119). This move from the self to a broader societal context has all of the underpinnings of Honneth’s shared value horizon as it incorporates an intersubjectively shared experience through culture. Ultimately, Liftin’s description of sacrifice promotes a positive view of the environment and strengthens the ethical dimension of self-environment and societal-environmental interactions.

Liftin describes self-sacrifice as neither a burden nor an anomaly of culture. In fact, because it is “premised on a holistic ontology, an ecological politics of sacrifice would not be about compulsion, guilt or burdened self-sacrifice; rather it would grow out of a sense of self as interwoven with earth, cosmos, species and society” (127). There are clear undertones of symbiosis in Liftin’s description of self-sacrifice. When the mutually dependent relationship between oneself and the environment is understood through the pattern of recognition outlined above, it follows that what is beneficial for the environment is also beneficial for oneself. To speak of sacrifice in terms of an encumbrance would miss the larger point that our symbiotic relationship with the environment not only requires that we sacrifice on its behalf, but that when we do, we are also recognizing our own situated dependence and needs.

Sri Aurobindo’s (1990) mapping of self-sacrifice in terms of an interconnected and positive process is relevant to what an intersubjectively shared value horizon ought to look like:

The acceptance of the law of sacrifice is a practical recognition by the ego that it is neither alone in the world nor chief in the world. That which appears for the moment other than ourselves and is certainly other than our limited personalities. The true essence of sacrifice is not self-immolation, it is self-giving; its object is not self-effacement, but self-fulfillment; its method not self-mortification, but a greater life (98).

The above passage speaks to the notion that the environment ought to be recognized as an end in itself rather than a means to an end just as human beings are for Honneth. Further, although Honneth’s model implies that individual autonomy be granted through structures of recognition, it is important to point out that even without the environment as an actor, Honneth’s framework requires some degree of self-sacrifice on the part of the individual. For example, not only does the mother sacrifice on behalf of her child in the sphere of love relationships, but individuals are constantly sacrificing and negotiating needs in the shared value horizon of society. The mere inclusion of the word ‘shared’ in Honneth’s analysis assumes that sacrifice is already a component of and prerequisite for recognition.

The inclusion of self-sacrifice in terms of a societal-environmental relationship is necessary at the level of an intersubjectively shared value horizon for a sustainable environmental justice movement to occur. New cultural attitudes can evolve out of a new conception of symbiosis between humans and the environment and the practice of self-sacrifice. Karen Liftin (2015) helps to clarify how this value shift evolves from the personal to the political:

The free, rational, and autonomous individual, even if illusory from a holistic perspective, became under secular modernity a social construct with real effects across the gamut of political, economic, and psychological life. An affirmative politics of sacrifice offers the opportunity for that individual to enter into a larger sense of self, offering some of the more shadowy expressions of his or her separative identity on the altar of ecological vitality and global justice… While changes in one’s own thinking and lifestyle may be important elements of that transformation, real solutions will require collective action on every level; indeed, this follows inexorably from the premise of interdependence (137-138).

It is clear that the level of agency required for an environmental justice movement that moves beyond ‘economism’ and rampant self-interest must be rooted in collective and shared goals. The framework for recognition that Honneth describes is invaluable in this respect as it provides a starting point from which to understand how a new form of environmental recognition might occur and transform into an intersubjectively shared value horizon.

**Part IV. From Economism to Ecological Ethics**

The personification of the environment in terms of its symbiotic attachment to humans and consequent recognition, leads to a form of ecological ethics in which ‘economism’ becomes archaic, and solidarity is valued over individualism. John Martin Gillroy (2000) promotes what he calls ‘essential’ value over instrumental value in his adaptation of Kantian conservationism to present-day ecological ethics (239). Gillroy’s argument has implications for the politics of recognition as it relies on the transformation from an individually-centered value system to one of solidarity as born out of Honneth’s shared value horizon. In this respect, ecological ethics serves as the vehicle that brings the political dimension of recognition into the modern context of environmental sustainability and stewardship.

As I mentioned in the opening of the paper, ‘economism’ promotes a “business case” for driving an environmental movement forward. Yet, further analysis suggests that a deeper understanding of self-environment relationships has the potential to not only nurture a broader symbiosis between society and the environment, but to also plant it properly in an intersubjectively shared value horizon. The value transformation that occurs through self-environment relationships and between larger society and the environment, provides a stable platform for ecologically-minded cultural attitudes to evolve into concrete political action. Gillroy (2000) imagines political agency occurring when we place “natural systems at the core of our definition of human freedom” to the extent that nature itself defines “the core of our ethics, our politics and our economies” (267). In this way, the environment becomes elevated in legal structures within society when we include it in our conception of autonomy and realize its function as a symbiotic partner both individually and collectively.

The type of ecological ethics that Gillroy defines is not predicated on the mere inclusion of environmental protection mechanisms within society, but rather the overall acceptance of the environment as a key player in itself. It is only when the environment is personified and engaged in a mutually dependent relationship with humans that it can achieve full political recognition. Further, the political implications of the inclusion of the environment as a disembodied actor are two-fold. First, moving away from anthropocentric-based relationships creates new avenues of recognition that can influence how human beings create their own identities. As mentioned previously, Honneth makes clear that autonomy does not necessary flow from legal recognition, but grows out from a self-realization process where individuals are made aware of their needs within the broader context of society and societal pressures. When autonomy is practiced in this way, ecological ethics becomes a space of mutual concern and a shared identity formation can occur. This new identity would mark a turning point away from the limited human to human struggle for recognition and help focus society’s attention towards recognizing the environment through collective action.

Second, when the environment gains recognition through its relationship with society, the human actor becomes the bulwark for its protection. Due to its perpetual state of infancy, environmental stewardship falls on the part of the human actor. Fortunately, collective action at this stage of recognition is a more amenable process because the environment has already been worked into the social fabric and value system within society. It is at this juncture where a successful environmental justice movement can begin.

*CONCLUSION*

While self-environment and societal-environment relationships seem to be compatible with Honenth’s framework for recognition, there is much to be determined regarding the practical application of political agency within this type of environmental justice movement. This analysis is limited in the same respect as Honneth’s theory, as creating an intersubjectively shared value horizon within society is an undoubtedly difficult task. Yet, there is a great deal of useful insight garnered through mapping patterns for recognition as they move from one level to the next. There is certainly a need to move past the self-interest model of ‘economism’ if we are to realize the type of ecological ethics articulated by Gillroy. Including a fourth level of recognition predicated on the symbiotic relationship between individuals and the environment can potentially provide a solid basis for the creation of a new ecological ethics and sustainable environmental justice movement. Indeed, recognizing the environment as a political agent through its symbiosis with humans and human action is an ideal, but it is not unattainable. In fact, Connolly’s self-realization process is a useful step in this direction. Most remarkable in this analysis is the implication that a mere shift in the understanding of our relationship to the environment could very well serve as the driving force for its recognition. It is only through understanding the natural environment as a mutual agent that it can become an entity worth being saved in itself. As Honneth points out, recognition is not born out of detachment, rather it is through our entanglements with each other and with ‘nature,’ that we can produce new ecological imaginaries and an ecologically-minded politics.

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