# Normative Reconstruction, Constructivism and the Idealization of Ethical Life

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## Abstract

The goal of this paper is to make a methodological assessment of Axel Honneth's project of 'normative reconstruction' (Honneth, 2014a). I argue that its main justificatory goal is not accomplished: normative reconstruction fails to offer a superior and distinct model of normative critique to constructivist moral theories. Normative reconstruction abstracts away from historical forms of injustice and domination in a similar way as constructivism. The source of this problem lies in the fact that the practice of reconstruction relies on the privileging of certain ethical experiences at the expense of others, thus producing an idealized and exclusionary image of a given ethical community. Furthermore, reconstruction entails an idealized ontology which hypostatizes social norms and institutions, neglecting their embeddedness in historical relations of power. Rather than providing a practice-sensitive approach, normative reconstruction provides an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model which fails to produce a workable image of social reality from which to engage in normative critique.

## Keywords

*Normative Reconstruction, Constructivist moral theory, Ideal theory, Ideal-as-idealized models*

## Introduction

In political theory, there is a method of social analysis called normative reconstruction. According to Axel Honneth, this method consists of identifying the normative principles that guide social recognition in a given society, and judge whether they are fully realized by existing institutions. The scholarly debate around normative reconstruction has significantly focused on whether normative critique should solely address 'recognition' as an all-encompassing social need, or advocate for a more plural approach that also distinguishes social claims for 'redistribution' (Honneth and Fraser 2003). Yet, less attention has been paid to another dimension of Honneth's method: namely, its tense relationship to constructivist moral theory.

The paradigmatic example of constructivism can be found in the work of John Rawls (1999), whose theory of justice consists in deriving moral principles from a hypothetical thought experiment where participants lack knowledge of their social position and are thus set to choose non-arbitrary social norms. We can also find contemporary applications of constructivism within critical theory in the work of Rainer Forst (2017), who argues that social relations are mediated by socially accepted justifications whose fundamental validity lies not in

this general acceptance itself but from the fulfilment of transcendental criteria of 'reciprocity' and 'generality'. Honneth makes the case for his method by arguing that constructivism wrongly relies on 'abstract' ideals or procedures that are theorized from hypothetical or transcendental standpoints, failing to acknowledge that the validity of normative ideals is always derived from their recognition by subjects in *actual* social relations.

However, this move from the 'abstractness' of constructivism to the apparent 'concreteness' of normative reconstruction needs to be qualified. The main problem that I identify is that normative reconstruction over-idealizes the social relations of the Western societies whose normativity it aims to reconstruct. In that sense, his model fails to theorize certain moral experiences of social dissatisfaction and historical forms of domination. This line of thought has not gone unnoticed in the literature on Honneth's method. For instance, Schaub (2015) has criticized normative reconstruction for being too conventionalist, that is, for uncritically endorsing the existing status quo of social values in a community and thus failing to theorize that certain individuals do not see their interests being advanced in those values. Alternatively, Allen (2016) has criticized Honneth for endorsing the moral superiority of Western institutions and norms as the starting point for social criticism, thus neglecting the reality of colonialism and falling prey to imperialist assumptions. My objective in this paper is to redirect these objections into an assessment of Honneth's main methodological commitment: that is, his goal to produce a method of critique superior and distinct from the 'abstractness' of constructivist theories.

My analysis confirms, with some qualifications, that normative reconstruction fails to provide such a model. On one hand, if the failure of constructivism lies in deriving normative principles from idealized abstract procedures, the failure of normative reconstruction lies in creating an idealized image of social relations over which normative ideals ought to apply. On the other hand, despite using evidently different strategies, both constructivism and normative reconstruction share an idealized ontology of social values and institutions that render both methods unable to theorize the role of power and domination in social reproduction.

Therefore, the paper will unfold as follows. First, I will outline the main premises of normative reconstruction, its justification over and against constructivism, and show what it would take to undermine such justification. Second, I will delineate the key insights of alternative critiques of Honneth, namely Schaub's and Allen's, to showcase how the method in question conceals certain moral experiences. Third, I will show how this concealment is connected to the method's notion of progress and its overly idealistic ontology of social values and institutions.

## Methodology

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth states four methodological premises that define his method (Honneth, 2014a). First, social reproduction is maintained through institutions that embody shared ethical goods. Second, that our ethical values are entangled in the actual existing institutions that safeguard social reproduction. Third, that reconstruction is concerned only with those institutions that have a true potential to realize the values in question. Finally, that reconstruction has the task of pointing out how certain institutions and social practices fail to realize our ethical goals (Honneth, 2014a, p. 3-10). In short, this method grounds itself in the reconstruction of

existing sources of normativity that circulate in a community after which institutions are judged according to the degree to which they accomplish their own normative expectations.

The question is, however, why should moral and ethical inquiry make this detour through reconstruction? Why are other methods of critique not better equipped to make normative claims about present institutions and social practices? For Honneth, the answer can be traced back to the differences between Hegelian and Kantian approaches to morality and ethical life. The problem of Kantian moral philosophy, up from which Hegel and then Honneth build upon, is the following paradox: whereby universal moral claims that are "generated through an act of autonomous self-subjection or through an uncoerced consensus" already assume the existence of moral principles at work that guarantee that very minimum level of autonomy or intersubjective agreement (Honneth 2014b, p. 817). In other words, the construction of justifications for abstract moral norms always already takes place in a context that has its own moral values and whose normativity is presupposed.

Thus, a moral norm that is derived from an "isolated act of reflection removed from everyday practice" inevitably leads to conflicts of moral compliance: subjects are confronted with 'external' moral norms which might not conform with their given social practices and moral sensibilities (Honneth, 2014b, p. 820). To overcome this problem, Honneth appeals to Hegel's concept of ethical life. Human activity counts as 'ethical' when the members of the community see themselves as being both "authors" and "addressees" of existing moral principles such that individuals evaluate each other's actions accordingly (Honneth, 2014b, p. 819). Furthermore, if the subjects can see their ethical goods being advanced through the application of those norms, the latter become not mere restrictions on their behaviour but vehicles for their personal self-realization. From this standpoint, the former Kantian split between norms and practices is resolved because now subjects can be seen to have an active involvement in the preservation of the existing norms and the continuous application of their underlying values.

This is how Honneth ultimately justifies his method over other forms of critique, especially, over constructivist moral theory. The latter is said to be 'powerless' because it is profoundly separated from the moral and ethical practices that define the very community it is meant to reflect upon. In contrast, normative reconstruction moves away from abstract formalism and actively engages with the existing normative resources that guide a given community. The question remains, however, whether this 'reconstructive detour' guarantees that our analysis will not fall prey to similar forms of abstraction as in constructivist moral theory. If the concern is to anchor normative inquiry to social reality, it is worth considering whether normative reconstruction, as proposed by Honneth, is actually capable of producing an appropriate image of social reality from which to conduct a suitable normative critique.

To be sure, the attempt to overcome the abstractness of constructivism is also found in other types of immanent critique and is not exclusive of normative reconstruction. For example, Rahel Jaeggi (2009) also rejects constructivism; however, she points out that normative critique should not only show how certain institutions *contingently* fail to realize their underlying normative potential but how this failure is a *necessary* feature of the values and institutions at work. From a different angle, Stahl (2023) argues that our social ideals are always

produced and dependent on the social practices in which we are situated and hence no social ideal could claim to be the definitive horizon of our normative aspirations. Social progress thus happens not only by adjusting institutions to ideals which are already fixed but by changing both the social practices *and* the ideals meant to be realized. Honneth's model, instead, posits that social development is already directed to the realization of values which, from his point of view, constitute roughly fixed normative horizons.

Against this idea that society runs its course towards the greater realization of fixed normative values, I will raise a similar criticism as the one that Charles Mills raises against Rawls' constructivism. Mills points that Rawls' approach abstracts *away* "from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions" thereby guaranteeing that our ideals will never be achieved (2005, p. 170). What Mills has in mind here are the relations of structural domination, oppression and historical injustice that are concealed at the expense of constructing an idealized model of justice. In other words, an ideal of justice is constructed without the relevant facts on actual injustice. In the case of Honneth, the practice of reconstruction reproduces the same exclusions and yields an idealized image of the ethical community purified from relations of domination and injustice. In the following section, I will showcase how certain moral experiences are privileged over others through the practice of reconstruction.

## Reconstruction and its discontents

The exclusionary tendencies inherent in normative reconstruction are crystallized in the two major objections to Honneth's work. To start, Schaub's objection can have a weak and a strong version. The weak version argues that grounding normative critique on existing values and principles implies already an uncritical endorsement of the ethical status quo and, thus, there cannot be room for critique. Honneth does recognize this challenge when he states that "every reconstructive procedure of social criticism faces the problem that it cannot really justify what makes the ideals from its own culture chosen to be a reference point normatively defensible or desirable in the first place" (Honneth, 2009, p. 50). Elsewhere, however, he does attempt to provide a distinction between merely *existing* ideals and *valid* ideals for critique. He proposes a pragmatist reading of Kant from which to validate certain principles as irrevocable progressive achievements of moral rationalization. Since this is a dimension of his theory more closely connected to the Allen's critique, I will engage with this element at a later stage.

However, there is a stronger version of Schaub's objection which poses a greater challenge to Honneth's rejoinder. This version recognizes Honneth's attempt to address the weak version, but it claims that there are further implicit elements in his theory that lead the method to a status quo bias. From the second and third premise of the method, we understand that reconstruction is exclusively concerned with those institutions that can realize the normative values underpinning them and which have proved to be valid standards for critique. In that sense, critical inquiry can only aim at showing how *existing* institutions can better realize *existing* norms and values. Normative reconstruction in this way cannot account for radical changes in the ethical structure of a society: whereby "*new* institutions with *new* underlying norms, are established in the void left behind" by the former ethical structure (Schaub, 2015, p. 114).

Here we can see that Honneth's exclusive focus on achieving a correspondence between norms and institutions misses the fact that our relations to both are much more varied and complex. Our relation to norms and institutions is not reducible to our greater or lesser understanding of how certain values could be better institutionalized. As Schaub points out, subjects also experience several forms of disillusion and withdrawal from existing ethical structures: subjects can reach the conclusion that certain institutions do *not* have the potential to realize values, or that their very realization can create unhappiness or social suffering (2015, p. 123-126). These negative experiences also have a normative dimension that remains, nonetheless, unexplored under the methodological premises of normative reconstruction. This method does not account for those negative moral experiences and, in fact, prevents them from achieving a theoretical status within the reconstructed model of the ethical community.

Furthermore, these forms of exclusion embedded in reconstruction become more substantive when we look at the Allen's objection. Honneth's reliance on a concept of progress is invoked to justify the normative superiority of the Western moral order (Allen, 2016, p. 82-87). Following Kant, Honneth argues that the very fact that individuals in western societies actively engage with the values and institutions of their community bears within itself an implicit claim to the normative superiority over previous arrangements of values and institutions: in other words, any abandonment of the ethical structure of the West would implicitly be regarded as a regression. Only by recourse to this concept, is Honneth able to regard the norms and institutions of western societies as *valid* and not merely *existent* sources for social critique and, thus, overcome the weak version of the Schaub's objection.

As Allen points out, however, this gesture can give Honneth's reconstructive method a rather imperialist profile, since we would have to infer that all previous and contemporary non-western societies should be regarded as backwards. In doing so, Honneth's method yields a rather awkward depiction of the ethical life in Western societies: in his reconstructed image, the 'moral infrastructure' of the West is characterized as an inherently progressive space that tends, although with some discontinuities, towards the continuous expansion of the ideals of freedom and social recognition. The defining characteristic of the moral development in the West is, then, the progressive increase in inclusion and individualization through which individuals can enhance their opportunities for self-realization (Honneth, 2003, p. 184-185).

How to reconcile this reconstructed image of 'ever-growing freedom and recognition' with the histories of colonialism and the continuities of racial oppression in the core and the peripheries of the West? These forms of historical injustice and structural oppression have a central role in the historical emergence of Western societies and can hardly be seen as external elements foreign to its political constitution or moral and ethical structures (Mills, 2021, p. 239-240). The need to resituate these forms of injustice within a reconstructed image of Western ethical life becomes more urgent when the very principles of freedom and equality have historically been used as ideological tools to enforce colonial and racial relations of injustice.

To be sure, normative reconstruction does contemplate a way to account for the coexistence between the expansion of social recognition in the West's core and its underlying histories of racial and colonial violence. It

could be argued that the limited extension of social recognition to racialized and colonized subjects was due to a 'pathology of reason': whereby dominant groups undermined the collective understanding of established valid principles, like social freedom and legal equality, and thus excluded certain subjects from the interpretation of those norms (Honneth, 2009, p. 31). In that sense, specific dominant rationalities distorted the general process of directed moral development (Honneth 2009, p. 36). However, this concept of pathology does little to alter the fundamental image of Western ethical life as a space for 'ever-growing recognition'. By placing racism and colonial violence under the rubric of 'pathologies' or 'distortions', they constitute at most *deviations* from an already assumed progressive motion towards development. In that sense, these negative moral experiences *do not* reach theoretical status as *constitutive* elements of Western ethical life. Hence, the operation of reconstruction produces an idealized western ethical community where the moral experiences of colonized subjects are underprivileged in relation to those of western, non-racialized subjects.

In both critiques we can observe that the practice of normative reconstruction is performed at the cost of privileging certain moral experiences over others. In this way, normative reconstruction universalizes the moral standpoint of those who are benefited through the preservation of the ethical structure and marginalizes the standpoint of those whose position and interests fail to be advanced within the ethical community. The result is an idealized image from which certain constitutive ethical relations remain undertheorized.

## Reason and power

In the previous section it has become clear how the method of reconstruction fails to give a workable image of the very social reality it is meant to reflect upon. The exclusionary gestures contained within the practice of reconstruction suggest that this method is not all too sensitive to the actual configuration of social practices. To clarify this point, I will appeal to Charles Mills' classification of moral theories. I will use such classification to introduce the idea that normative reconstruction employs an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model that tends to create a hypostatized image of ethical life removed from historical relations of power.

For Mills (2005), even if all forms of moral theory are committed to certain moral ideals and require some form of abstraction from social reality, we can distinguish between two kinds of moral models: 'ideal-as-descriptive' and 'ideal-as-idealized'. The first kind consists of models which abstract the totality of events in social reality and identify only those which are essential to its nature or belong to its fundamental dynamic. The second model, instead, delineates "what people *should* be like (character), how they *should* treat each other (right and good actions), and how society *should* be structured in its basic institutions (justice)" (Mills, 2005, p. 168). The key difference between the two models then lies in the fact that ideal-as-idealized models do not theorize *actual* social events or social relations, such that it "tacitly represents the *actual* as a simple deviation from the *ideal*, not worth theorizing in its own right, or claims that starting from the ideal is at least the best way of realizing it" (2005, p. 168). From this perspective, ideal-as-idealized models rely on an idealized ontology of social values and institutions; thereby, "the ways in which systematic oppression is likely to shape the basic social institutions (as well as the humans in those institutions) will not be part of the theory's concern, and this will manifest itself in the absence of ideal-as-descriptive-model concepts that would provide the necessary macro and micro-mapping of that oppression" (2005, p. 168)

This distinction leads Mills to criticize ideal theory on metanormative grounds: if the purpose of moral theory is to guide our practical dealings with the world, the idealization of ethical relations and social institutions is not only unhelpful but also antithetical to the task of understanding how injustice actually operates, and how it is best to resolve it (2005, p. 170). To be sure, one could argue that constructivist theory does attempt to attune its abstract principles to non-ideal circumstances. For example, in the case of Rawl's theory of justice, even if the principles of justice are derived from an idealized original position, they ought to be adapted to real-world experiences in later constitutional, legislative and judicial stages based on the knowledge of actual society (Rawls, 1999, p. 171-176). Yet this gesture may not be sufficient: if actual injustices are not thoroughly theorized in the original position, there is no guarantee that the ideal principles would have any bearing on actual social relations even if they are 'modified' for that purpose. For example, if the ideals of justice happen to be solely *distributive* in nature, even at a legislative stage with knowledge of racial domination, the principle will likely fail to fully address the latter problem since it is not only distributive but structural in nature.

Mills' point is relevant because it raises a similar critique to that which Honneth raises against Kantian-inspired constructivist theories. Just as Mills does, Honneth aims to ground ethical inquiry in social reality and avoid the abstract idealizations of constructivism. The practice of reconstruction, then, is initially proposed as an attempt to make an ideal-as-descriptive model which can abstract the diversity of social relations of a community and identify its fundamental ethical structure. However, we have already noted how the exclusion of certain ethical perspectives produces rather an idealized ethical community where the sole concern is to achieve a correspondence between existing norms and institutions. Insofar as institutions are primarily understood in terms of their normative potential, their implication in relations of power and domination remains undertheorized. This results from his notion of progress given that in the differentiation of valid from existing norms of critique, the first are taken to embody a process of irreversible moral rationalization or development. In turn, existing institutions and norms which are regarded as *valid* are *primarily* treated as *embodiments of the realization of practical reason*.

As such, the main criterion that is used to judge such values and institutions is their irrevocable normative potential rather than their deployment in historical and ongoing structures of domination. This amounts to saying that once an ethical structure is 'reconstructed', it is hypostatized as an ideal source of normativity detached from the historical structures of power from which it emerged, and which continue to regulate its reproduction. The ethical structure is fundamentally characterized by its *idealized* normative potential rather than its *historical* or *actual* realization, which corresponds to an ontology of ideal-as-idealized moral models. Honneth is well aware of the problems that stem from a separation between moral rationalization and historical power structures. In fact, normative reconstruction is also concerned with overcoming such a split between moral reason and power. Nevertheless, my argument is that - despite Honneth's efforts - the method of normative reconstruction is essentially dependent on an idealized treatment of social values and institutions and, thus, operates under a strong separation between reason and power.

To clarify this point, it is worth considering once again how the concept of pathology is used in Honneth's work as an attempt to overcome the previous separation. A social pathology implies a general distortion in the realization of reason, such that dominant groups impose a specific rationality under which the interpretation of existing norms and social practices remains restricted. In this way, the irrevocable normative potentials contained in the ethical structure remain curtailed. Thus, it initially seems that the implications of power in moral development are indeed theorized to some extent. However, this conceptualization leads to the idea that the prevalence of power relations is only a *defection* from a state of 'undistorted rationality' or 'undistorted moral learning'. The latter appears as a purified ideal standard from which to judge the present, defective state of affairs. In this way, not only is the distinction between power and reason enforced, but the *actual* state of the ethical community is regarded only as a *deviation* from the ideal and not theorized in its own right. In such circumstances, the concept of pathology of reason is still circumscribed to the ideal-as-idealized model of social values and institutions.

To say that normative reconstruction relies on an idealized ontology of social values and institutions serves to undermine the very idea of 'ethical life' as a sphere of mutual self-recognition and freedom. If relations of power and domination are as constitutive of the West as their opposite, we cannot endorse the idea of an ethical community as a self-corrective structure that merely resolves its own 'inconsistencies' or 'defects'. Instead, social relations seem to be forming a set of contradictory and antagonistic whole in which the realization freedom is not the result of an inner tendency of the structure but of the struggle of each individual and group at a given point in time.

## Conclusion

This paper constitutes an immanent critique of Axel Honneth's work, insofar as the latter has been evaluated based on its own methodological standards of justification. Despite Honneth's concern for grounding normative critique in social analysis, the practice of reconstruction fails to provide a workable image of social reality from which to engage in normative critique. Instead, it produces a hypostatized image of ethical life for which certain ethical standpoints must be privileged over others and in which social institutions are idealized at the expense of their actual and historical manifestations. In that sense, reconstruction employs an 'ideal-as-idealized' moral model which, like constructivism, can be criticized for abstracting away from ongoing structures of power, historical injustice and domination.

Even if Honneth aimed to historically ground normativity in existing social practices, and thus avoid constructivist moral theory, he can only do so by appealing to a notion of progress as moral rationalization which, after Schaub's and Allen's objection, proves to conceal colonial and racial relations of power within the West's core and the periphery. On balance, Honneth's method fails to prove that it offers a superior and distinctive model of critique to constructivism: not only do both normative reconstruction and constructivism fail to thematize actual social relations, but they are also highly committed to an idealized ontology of social institutions and values. Honneth articulates a sophisticated model of ethical life which, unfortunately, after a series of detours, falls prey to unwarranted abstractions.

## Conflict of Interests

The author states no conflict of interests.

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