

The Burden Faced by External Norms: A Response to Bartol

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In his follow-up to my recent article “Internal Injuries,” Jordan Bartol has touched upon what he takes to be some significant concerns with my criticism of Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition. I am glad to be given the chance to clarify and defend some of my previous claims in this short response.

First, I ask that the reader once again consider a key difference between internal and external critique as described by Antti Kauppinen. In his paper (2002), he describes the burden that external critique faces in terms of justifying norms as universal (pp. 481); a difficulty, he continues, that internal critique escapes because it draws its criticism from the internal values of a particular system. What I am concerned with here is that Honneth, in maintaining that recognition theory is a purely internal method of critique, uses the idea of a surplus of value as a premise without adequately justifying its universality. My main point, which I hope to clarify here, is not that recognition theory, based on the surplus of value idea, is an unacceptable form of critique; rather, I have simply argued that it is unable to stand alone as a form of internal critique.

I thus believe that Bartol has wrongly characterized my position as being a complete rejection of external critique. Indeed, external principles can be extremely valuable (and perhaps a necessity) for transhistorical critique. What I hope to have argued in my recent article is not that Honneth’s recognition theory ought to be rejected outright due to its reliance on the surplus of value idea. Rather, that by wrongly characterizing it as pure internal critique, the double burden explained by Kauppinen (2002) that demands that an external norm be both justified as universally valued and unambiguous enough to be practically applicable, is ignored. It appears as if Honneth himself is at least somewhat aware of the significance of this challenge, suggesting that without a plausible concept of moral progress, recognition theory is merely speculative (2002, pp. 518).

What I propose is that we seek a more fully developed moral theory that acknowledges any reliance on external norms and attempts to justify those

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norms as universally held. I believe that Bartol has made an important advance in our debate with his sketch of a universally grounded critique involving both internal and external principles. Though it is not something that I can fully address in such short space, I caution against presupposing the universality of an external premise without a rigorous justification as I feel Honneth has done with regards to the surplus of value aspect of recognition theory. While Bartol has certainly put forth a convincing theoretical model for a universally valid external critique, it is important not to ignore the burden that external norms face by wrongly characterizing them as internal.

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Works Cited

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Kauppinen, Antti (2002) "Reason, Recognition, and Internal Critique," *Inquiry*, 45(4) 479-498.