Butler, Hegel and the Role of Recognition in Organizations

Max Visser[1]

Abstract

In the past decade, the concept of recognition appears to have acquired an important theoretical position in the work and organization literature. While in principle recognition denotes a positive and social form of freedom, in current-day organizations recognition may be often negative or instrumental. In order to capture this ambivalence in organizational recognitive conditions, the recent work of the American philosopher Judith Butler appears particularly applicable. The purpose of this paper is to explore theoretically to what extent her views on recognition shed new light on the variety of recognition patterns in current-day organizations. Towards that purpose, this paper first turns to the 'master-slave' episode in the work of Hegel and its influential interpretation by Kojève, which are at the heart of Butler's reading and conception of recognition. As a second step, the ambivalent conception of recognition in the work of Butler is discussed and critically assessed, while in the final section this conception is extended to work and organizations.

Keywords Judith Butler · Recognition theory · Hegel · Recognition in organizations

Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of recognition appears to have acquired an important theoretical position in the work and organization literature (e.g., Bailey and Madden 2019; Kristensen and Kristensen 2023; Mao and Xue 2022; Sebrechts et al. 2019; Tweedie 2020; Tyler and Vachhani 2021). As a concept with a long history, recognition ('Anerkennung') was a recurrent theme in 18th century Continental idealist philosophy, where it found its most authoritative treatment in the work of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). Basically, recognition denotes a form of freedom that is social and relational: subject A is free to the extent that subject B recognizes A's freedom *and* vice versa; no subject can be free on its own. As such, recognition is at the heart of Hegel's thinking about freedom as

✉ Max Visser
  max.visser@ru.nl

1   Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, 6500 HK NijmegenP.O. Box 9108,
    The Netherlands

social freedom, and this social freedom in its turn is the cornerstone of Hegel's whole philosophy (Klikauer 2012; Houlgate 1998).

However, as with most philosophers, Hegel developed different positions in the course of his thinking and, partly as a result thereof, has been interpreted in different ways (Ferrarese 2011). Two conceptions of recognition are distinguished in the literature (Bertram and Celikates 2015; Brincat 2014; Ikäheimo 2017). The first conception runs from Hegel through Mead and Habermas into the work of philosophers like Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth. They have been characterized as 'optimistic theorists of recognition,' because they regard recognition as a condition that enables freedom, assuming that a lack of recognition or negative forms of recognition can be overcome and remedied. The second conception runs from Hegel through Kojève, Althusser and Foucault into the work of the American philosopher Judith Butler. Their work has been characterized as more 'ambivalent,' even 'pessimistic,' because they regard recognition as a condition that enables *and* constrains freedom at the same time (Ikäheimo et al. 2021: 6, 8; Klikauer 2016; Lepold 2018; McQueen 2015).

These different conceptualizations are directly relevant to the fields of work and organization. While in an ideal world workers would (and should) be positively recognized by their managers and corporation owners (and indeed by society as a whole) as unique human beings with rights, potentialities and competencies, in practice recognition may be false or instrumental. This happens, for example, when workers as 'employees of the month' are only valued for achieving narrowly defined performance goals or when female workers are only valued for care and support tasks that reinforce gender stereotypes (Hancock 2022; Maia and Cal 2014). Problems of false or negative recognition may be particularly acute in large national and multinational corporations, some of which now have the size and financial clout of a medium-sized developed country (Sikka and Willmott 2010; Larson 2018). Some of these corporations appear to act as 'private governments,' controlling the working and even private lives of their employees with increasing intensity, totality and viciousness (Anderson 2017; Geppert and Pastuh 2017; Moore and Robinson 2016). Naturally, not all corporations (and organizations in general) treat their workers with disrespect and depreciation, but the diversity of recognition patterns requires a concept of recognition that is capable of accommodating both positive and negative aspects thereof.

The work of Butler appears as particularly interesting in this respect. In general, she is best known for her work on gender, identity and performativity, inside and outside organizations (e.g., Harding 2014; Keucheyan 2014; Komporozos-Athanasiou et al. 2018). More recently, Butler's work has taken what many observers conceive as an 'ethical turn, from the politics of gender performativity… towards a politics of precarity' (Kellogg 2017: 84–85; Lepold 2018; Petherbridge 2016), a turn generally held to commence in Butler (2000) and further elaborated in Butler (2004, 2005, 2009a, b, 2012, 2015a, 2018, 2021); Butler and Connolly (2000) and in Malabou and Butler (2011).[1] Here Butler returns to Hegel and his French interlocutors, and considers recognition, precarity and vulnerability as current-day instantiations of Hegel's well-known master-slave dialectic (Stark 2014; Tyler 2020). This part of her work appears especially applicable to ambivalent recognitive conditions in cur-

---

[1] Butler herself has rejected this notion of an 'ethical turn' in her work. Thus, already in an interview in May 1996 she discussed the notion of 'abject bodies' as an extension of the earlier discussion of abjection in Butler (1993): 'the abject for me is in no way restricted to sex and heteronormativity. It relates to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be 'lives' and whose materiality is understood not to 'matter' (Costera Meijer and Prins 1998: 281). Notions of ethics have been present since her earliest discussions of recognition and constitutive alterity (Schippers 2015; Stark 2014).

rent-day organizations. Therefore, this more recent 'turn' of Butler's work is used in this paper. More precisely, the purpose of this paper is to explore theoretically to what extent her views on recognition shed new light on the variety of recognition patterns in current-day organizations.

Towards that purpose, as a first step this paper turns to Hegel, in particular the master-slave (or lord-bondsman)[2] episode from his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977; hereafter *PhS*) and the influential interpretation thereof by Kojève, which are 'at the heart of Butler's reading' and conception of recognition (Ferrarese 2011: 760; Brincat 2014). As a second step, the ambivalent conception of recognition in the work of Butler is discussed and critically assessed, while in the final section this conception is extended to work and organizations.

Hegel, Kojève and the Master-slave (Lord-bondsman) Dialectic

Freedom is central to the whole of Hegel's philosophy: the history of the world is nothing but the progress of the consciousness of freedom.[3] In *PhS* Hegel traces this development through the main stages of consciousness (§ 90–165), self-consciousness (§ 166–230) and reason (§ 231–808). He begins with 'sense-certainty,' a primitive form of consciousness that simply records objects as they are immediately presented before it (§ 90–110). Dialectically moving forward, Hegel then presents 'perception' (§ 111–131) and 'understanding' (§ 132–165) as successive stages in which consciousness increasingly becomes active in classifying and constructing the reality before it. With this constructive activity, however, consciousness also becomes latently self-conscious, increasingly attempting to understand and reflect on its own constructive activity, at which point the second main stage of self-consciousness sets in.

For Hegel, self-consciousness cannot exist in solipsistic isolation; it needs an object in relation to which it can contrast or differentiate itself, an object that thus at the same time is necessary for *and* alien to self-consciousness (§ 166–177). The constructive activity of consciousness now takes on the practical form of desire, the wish of self-consciousness to negate or transform the object and thereby to make it its own. However, such desire is internally inconsistent: self-consciousness cannot continue to negate what is needed for its own continued existence. Hegel's solution to this inconsistency is to pose as object another self-consciousness, which cannot be negated as a simple object but at the same time can negate itself. Desire is replaced by recognition: 'self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged' (§ 178). Recognition in its pure logical form requires symmetry between self-con-

---

[2] The German terms are 'Herr' and 'Knecht,' whereby the latter should be translated as 'servant' or 'bondsman' and not as 'slave' (which would be 'Sklave' in German). Hegel himself explicitly distinguished between 'Knecht' and 'Sklave' (Arthur 1983: 69 n.13; Denz 2016). The translation as 'master' and 'slave' has primarily come via the French lectures on Hegel by Kojève and their subsequent translation into English (Kojève 1969). These differences in translation seem indicative of the optimistic and pessimistic conceptions of recognition and will be used interchangeably in this paper.

[3] This section summarizes the *PhS* and in particular the place of the lord-bondsman parable therein in an admittedly simplified form, drawing on more extensive and complex discussions by Badiou (2017), Cobben (2012), Denz (2016), Houlgate (1998, 2003) and Singer (2001: 63–81). Reference throughout this paper is to the specific paragraph numbers in Miller's 1977 translation of *PhS*, denoted by a §; italics in quotes are always original.

sciousnesses. Each self-consciousness' selfhood is mediated by the recognition of another self-consciousness and vice versa: 'they *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another' (§ 184).

As a next step, Hegel introduces inequality in recognition, stemming from the introduction of the body in the pure logical recognitive relationship: each self-consciousness takes on the form of an 'individual' or 'independent shape' for the other and vice versa (§ 185–186). This attachment of self-consciousness to the body of itself and the other encroaches on the self-certainty and self-subsistence of each self-consciousness and leads to the desire to negate the other through a 'life-and-death struggle' (§ 187). Pure self-consciousness can only prove its own freedom by showing that it is not dependent on its own body and on the body of the other. At the same time, when one body dies its self-consciousness also ceases to exist, depriving the other, victorious body of its source of recognition: 'in this experience, self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness.' Therefore, either through sparing the life of the defeated or through surrendering to the victor, the outcome of the life and death struggle is that one self-consciousness becomes independent and for itself and that the other becomes dependent and for the other: 'the former is lord, the other is bondsman' (§ 189).

As a result of the struggle, the bondsman is put to work for the lord, who enjoys both the subservience of the bondsman and the fruits of his labor. By regarding the bondsman as a 'thing' or slave, however, the lord deprives himself of the self-certainty he originally sought: 'the outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal' (§ 191). The bondsman, on the other hand, has 'experienced the fear of death,' but through his working on external nature and by shaping external things into something permanent he gradually staves off this fear and becomes 'conscious of what he truly is' (§ 194–195). Even though the lord still directs him and enjoys the results of his labor, the bondsman 'realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own,' although this 'self-will' is a 'freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude' (§ 196).

The dialectic then moves forward to a state of Stoicism, in which the bondsman, now fully self-conscious through his labor, finds freedom and 'self-will' in withdrawing from the outer world into his own consciousness. This state, however, is undetermined and abstract, and soon becomes 'tedious' (§ 200). It gives way to a state of Scepticism, in which the bondsman finds 'self-will' by cynically turning to the outer world in order to constantly refute and negate it. Yet this is a profound internally contradictory state, a duality in consciousness which prevents the bondsman from perceiving and acting in the world as a unitary individual. The dialectic moves to a state in which 'the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one… the [state of] *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being' (§ 206).

Hegel's master-slave episode received an important and influential (re)interpretation by the Russian-French philosopher Alexandre Kojève (1902–1968). Kojève centers almost exclusively on the life and death struggle and the resultant master-slave dialectic in *PhS* (§ 185–196), and largely glosses over the symmetrical and mutual recognition relation between self-consciousnesses that Hegel develops in § 178–184 (Arthur 1983; Lynch 2001). As a consequence, mutual recognition gives way to.

the existence of *several* Desires that can desire one another mutually, each of which wants to negate, to assimilate, to make its own, to subjugate, the other Desire as Desire… the action that is born of these Desires can– at least in the beginning– be nothing but a life and death *Fight*… since each will want to subjugate the other, *all* the others, by a negating, destroying *action* (Kojève 1969: 40–41).

For Kojève, human social and historical existence is thus beset by existential conflicts involving fighting, slavery and work (Houlgate 2003; Robbins 2001; Sobel 2015).

Further, Kojève interprets the 'mind of his own' and 'self-will' the slave develops as the result of his work for the master and the unequal recognition the master receives from the slave (in § 193–196) as culminating in the revolt of the slave against the master and in the subsequent establishment of a society of mutual recognition (McGowan 2017; Lynch 2001; Roth 1985). In line with Marx, this society as 'realm of freedom' marks the 'end of History' and ushers in an era of peace and prosperity in which there is room for 'art, love, play, etc., etc.; in short, everything that makes Man *happy*.' On the other hand, this era will mark the '*definitive annihilation* of Man *properly so-called*,' because the negating activity, struggle and contestation that define Man's essence have also come to an end (Kojève 1969: 159, 160 n.6, italics original; Fukuyama 1992).

Kojève's dark reading of Hegel proved very influential in post-war French philosophy (Lilla 2001). Sartre in particular in *Being and Nothingness* develops a notion of recognition as 'expropriation, violation and loss of freedom through the concept of the 'look' or 'gaze'… in which the *mutuative* realization of freedom, autonomy, self-assertion or authenticity becomes an impossibility' (Yar 2001: 60–61). Following Kojève and Sartre, post-war French philosophers like Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Deleuze further extended this notion of recognition, in which the (Hegelian) subject is increasingly caught in inescapable linguistic and historical differences that are no longer dialectically resolved. This French reworking of Hegel in its turn provided the basis of Butler's doctoral work, published in 1987 as *Subjects of Desire* (Butler 1987; Robbins 2001).

Butler and the Ambivalent Conception of Recognition

In line with Kojève's interpretation of Hegel, to Butler relationships of mutual recognition are fraught with a perpetual tension between symmetry (in which subjects reciprocally recognize one another) and asymmetry (in which subjects assert their self-subsistence by trying to negate the other, but in doing so threaten the basis of their very social existence and thus fall into a master-slave relationship): 'this binding character of sociality is part of what I understand as 'Spirit' in Hegel…' (Butler 2018: 249). On this basis, Butler has developed her ideas on recognition in what is reconstructed here in three steps.

As a first step, the mutual recognition that is being offered is always mediated and regulated by social norms that originate in society as a whole. The subjects involved in recognitive relationships are not self-grounded, sovereign preconditions of thought and action, but conditioned by a performative 'stylized repetition of acts' and discursive practices reiterating social norms (Butler 1988: 519; 2010; Ingala 2017). The struggle for recognition thus does not end in the dyad of master and slave:

the struggle for recognition as it is staged in the *Phenomenology* reveals the inadequacy of the dyad as a frame of reference for understanding social life. After all, what eventually follows from this scene is a system of customs (*Sittlichkeit*) and hence a social account of the norms by which reciprocal recognition might be sustained in ways that are more stable than either the life and death struggle or the system of bondage would imply. The dyadic exchange refers to a set of norms that exceed the perspectives of those engaged in the struggle for recognition… There is a language that frames the encounter, and embedded in that language is a set of norms concerning what will and will not constitute recognizability. This is Foucault's point and, in a way, his supplement to Hegel (Butler 2005: 29–30).

Such norms become authoritative through 'interpellation,' an important notion that Butler took over from Althusser and in which recognition, subjection and subjectivation coincide (e.g., Butler 1993, Butler 1997, 2009b, 2015b, 2016). In Althusser's example, this happens when a police officer (as representative of the ideology of the capitalist state) accosts a person, passing by in the street, by shouting 'hey, you there.' Assuming that the interpellated subject turns round, by doing so it becomes at one and the same time '(1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission' (Althusser 1971: 182). In Butler's example, interpellation also occurs when a doctor or nurse cries out at birth 'it's a girl!' or 'it's a boy!' The medical interpellation recognizes the as yet ungendered baby as a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that way not only subjects the baby to gender, but also subjectifies it by gender (Butler 1993: 7). It is the start of an ongoing process of 'girling' and 'boying,' constituting the still tenuous gender identity of the baby over time (Butler 1988, 2010).

To the extent that these norms in 'interpellation' become performative and authoritative through their constant iteration and repetition, they also constitute social power as conceived of by Foucault:

the 'I' is produced through power, though not the deterministic effect of power… if the terms of power lay out 'who' can be a subject, who qualifies as a subject of recognition, in politics, or before the law, then the subject is not a precondition of politics, but a differential effect of power (Butler 2009b: iii; Willig 2012).

These norms are not single or discrete and do not operate in a deterministic way, but they provide more general conditions that govern recognizability. Recognizability as a subject thus precedes recognition, describing 'those general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place… condition[ing] in advance who will count as a subject, and who will not' (Butler 2009a: 6; 2009b: iv).

As a second step, the tensions inherent in the recognitive relationship and the role of social norms have led Butler to postulate a subject that is incoherent and divided in itself (i.e., as an 'unhappy consciousness,' following Hegel 1977: § 206). This poses limits to the possible depth of reciprocal recognition and to the amount of social and personal responsibility and accountability that subjects may display themselves and may expect in others (Butler 1997, 2000, 2005). The ethically justifiable question to be asked under such conditions is no longer 'what are you?' (which presupposes a firm self-knowledge and identity

in the Other that is knowable), but 'who are you?' (which presupposes a uniqueness in the Other that is never fully knowable):

> And as we ask to know the other, or ask that the other say, finally, who he or she is, it will be important that we do not expect an answer that will ever satisfy. And by not pursuing satisfaction, we let the other live, offering a recognition that is not based on knowledge, but on its limits (Butler and Connolly 2000).

As a third step, the tensions inherent in the recognitive relationship and the basic ambiguity of the subject in relation to Others lead to a 'social ontology of the body' (Butler 2009a: 3), a shared condition of precariousness in which 'one's life always in some sense [is] in the hands of the other… there is no life without the need for shelter and food, no life without dependency on wider networks of sociality and labor, no life that transcends injurability and mortality' (Butler 2009a: 14, 25). However, for Butler this shared condition of precariousness does not lead to reciprocal recognition, but to 'a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as 'destructible' and 'ungrievable'… 'lose-able'…[that] can be forfeited' (Butler 2009a: 31). In this sense (and consistent with a Kojèvian interpretation of master-slave dialectics), 'the struggle for recognition never fully overcomes the life and death struggle' (Butler 2015a: 222 n.3).

Precarity here appears as the political denial of precariousness (Butler 2004), or more precisely as 'that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009a: 25; 2009b: ii). Precarity has become particularly prevalent under neoliberal capitalism in the past three decades, exacerbated by the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemics of 2020 and thereafter (Butler 2020b). Precarious workers may be exposed to different modalities of 'social death' and 'unlivability,' for example those

> being part of a dispensable or expendable workforce for whom the prospect of a stable livelihood seems increasingly remote, and who live in a daily way within a collapsed temporal horizon, suffering a sense of a damaged future in the stomach and in the bones, trying to feel but fearing more what might be felt (Butler 2012: 12).

In response, Butler (2012, 2015a, 2020a) has extended her notion of performativity beyond speech acts and discourse to include non-violent, concerted actions of bodies, physically assembled in strikes or protest marches to resist and protest against precarity, the destruction of the social and economic conditions of livability. In this form, performativity.

> express[es] the extent that we seek to bring about a world in which livable life becomes more possible for more living beings… That is, we are seeking in our action to sustain a world without which life itself is imperiled. There are concrete ethical, ecological and non-violent ethical positions that follow from this claim, and it allows us to understand performativity as part of an ethical philosophy, if not a form of social praxis (Butler 2018: 249).

To summarize: the ambivalent conception, as developed by Judith Butler following Hegel, Kojève and Foucault, offers a view of recognition as a relationship in perpetual tension between symmetry and asymmetry between basically incoherent and ambiguous subjects, leading to mutual vulnerability and precariousness. This relationship is mediated by social norms and conditions which govern recognizability and thus determine precarity, distinguishing grievable and livable lives from ungrievable and unlivable ones, against which protest as concerted bodily action has become an ethical imperative. In this view, recognition is potentially liberating and oppressive, conferring freedom and subjection at the same time.

In this ambivalent, even pessimistic view on recognition, Butler's work and its philosophical underpinnings has not been exempted from critique. Arguing from the optimistic conception of recognition, Honneth has taken on the double nature of recognition in a discussion of interpellation and ideology in Althusser (and thus by extension in Butler 1993, 1997, 2009b, 2015b, 2016), for whom 'individuals can become socially identifiable subjects only by being subjected through public recognition to a web of social rules that does not possess any room for variation with respect to individual autonomy' (Honneth 2007a: 330–331). While acknowledging that human subjectivity can be influenced by pre-existing systems of discourse and social norms, Honneth does not adhere to the view that these systems and norms fully 'invalidat[e] the idea of autonomy in the sense of the authorship of the subject,' as Althusser seems to imply; instead such systems and norms act as 'constitutive conditions for individualization of subjects' (Honneth 2007b: 181, 183).

However, in the course of developing her work, Butler has eased the Althusserian undertones by pointing out how the performative force of social identity formation may fail by being exposed to counter performative reinterpretations (Ferrarese 2011; McKinlay 2010) and by further theorizing the primary vulnerability, precariousness and dependence between people (Allen 2006; Petherbridge 2016), thus moving somewhat closer to Honneth's position. Honneth, in his turn, after discussing Althusser became more mindful of 'recognition as ideology,' i.e. as false and equivocal forms of recognition that 'bear features of domination' (Honneth 2007a: 327; see also Honneth 2004; 2021; Visser and Arnold 2022).

Discussion and Conclusions

When extended to current-day organizations, Butler's work sheds new light on three important patterns of recognition therein, following the three steps in the previous section.

The first pattern pertains to Butler's conception of prevailing socio-economic norms governing recognizability. Her conception of social norms and power seems firmly tied to the 'disciplinary society,' with its emphasis on the surveillance and disciplining of workers in enclosed sites of confinement (Foucault 2020). Butler's examples from such sites as hospitals (Butler 1993: 7), the police (Butler 1997: 106–108), prisons (Butler 2004: 50–100) and the army (Butler 2009a) appear to point in that direction. She has been dismissive of Foucault's (2008) later work on neoliberalism and biopolitics, finding his claims.

> that the neoliberal form of the subject is inevitable… too sweeping, [as] they fail to take into account the forms of solidarity and alliance that are actively combating corporate greed, accelerating inequality, dispossession, and securitarian violence (Ingala 2017: 25).

In this way, Butler takes issue with the social norms according to which workers currently are 'interpellated' as 'human capital' and 'entrepreneurs of the self' in the ways Foucault predicted (Brown 2015; Fleming 2014, 2017). Here workers increasingly are expected or exhorted to put their individual initiative, flexibility, authenticity and talents to work, sometimes even violently so (e.g., Lindebaum and Courpasson 2019), but at the same they are sometimes closely controlled through performance metrics and electronic surveillance devices as 'quantified selves' to do exactly what their organizations wish them to do (Cooper 2015; Moore and Robinson 2016). Even where the 'disciplinary society' increasingly has given way to 'societies of control' (Deleuze 1995), which appear to offer a certain amount of freedom to take part in them or not, there are new subtle social norms emerging that may seduce people into voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure, inside and outside organizations (Han 2017). All these norms ultimately intensify the 'unhappy consciousness' of workers by promising a kind of freedom and recognition that in reality still is 'enmeshed in servitude' (Butler 1997: 42; Hegel 1977: § 196).

The second pattern pertains to Butler's views of accountability and responsibility. Under the influence of the neoliberal economic organization theories that Foucault (2008) discussed (like the Chicago-inspired agency and public choice theories), in current organizations accountability often takes on an instrumental character, viewing workers as generally rational actors and decision-makers who are prone to opportunistic behavior when given the opportunity, and who therefore are to be treated as calculative and calculable individuals (Messner 2009; Roberts 2009). However, Butler's (1997, 2000, 2005) postulation of an incoherent and divided subject casts doubts on the veracity and ethics of instrumental accountability. If self-knowledge is ultimately incoherent and limited, then it may not be ethically justified to regard workers as rational actors with transparent motives and intentions, nor can the managers who hold them accountable be regarded as such. Here more relational forms of accountability are called for, viewing workers (and managers) as opaque and only partly transparent, potentially prone to all kinds of behavior, and therefore to be treated as social and sociable humans, worthy of recognition (De Coster and Zanoni 2019; Painter-Morland 2006; Roberts 2009).

The third pattern pertains to Butler's views on precariousness and precarity. In principle, the basic sociality inherent in recognition puts workers, managers and firm owners on an ontological par, as reciprocally acknowledging each other's freedom and thus sharing mutual vulnerability. However, Butler's (2009ab) distinction between precariousness as an existential condition of social life and precarity as the socio-political conditions surrounding precariousness draws attention to the ethical responsibilities of organizations to alleviate the 'dark side' of recognition (e.g., Vandekerckhove 2021). For example, many (multinational) corporations today embrace forms of corporate social responsibility and recognize the importance of a diverse and inclusive workforce, but at the same time they sometimes maintain substandard working conditions and masculine hiring and promotion practices that in fact only deem able-bodied, male white workers as worthy of full recognition (Benschop 2021; Schneider 2020; Tyler and Vachhani 2021). Also, precarious working conditions still appear to be in place under current neoliberal capitalism, as the continuing existence of 'private governments' and an expendable workforce with little prospect of a stable livelihood seems to attest (Anderson 2017; Andersson et al. 2019; Petherbridge 2016; Visser and Arnold 2022).

At the same time, manifestations of physical protest and assembly to restore conditions of livability, as proposed by Butler (2015a, Butler 2020b), seem to have increased in recent years, for example in recent strikes, unionizing and protest marches at Amazon and Starbucks (e.g., Blanc 2022; Shattuc 2022). For Butler (2015a: 11), restoring conditions of livability in current-day organizations involves the 'demand for a more livable set of economic, social and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity,' for example by flexibilization of labor contracts and the arbitrary 'hire-and-fire' exploitation involved, and by individualization of occupational risks and health hazards (Tyler 2020). To accomplish this, concerted action is needed to change hierarchical and dependent relationships in the direction of democratic and cooperative self-management and corporate co-ownership by workers, in which top-down managerial decision-making is replaced by bottom-up participative planning and in which the needs of the workers are no longer subordinated to narrow profit needs (Adler 2019; Hägglund 2020; Phillips and Rozworski 2019).

To sum up: whereas neoliberal capitalism finds its justification in recognizing workers as individual 'entrepreneurs of the self,' continuously enhancing their 'human capital' and fully investing their work with their physical and psychological capabilities while at the same time being closely controlled, Butler offers a view of recognition of workers as socially interdependent, basically incoherent and ambiguous and therefore mutually vulnerable and precarious, differentially subjected to social and organizational norms of recognizability and thus precarity.

Looking back on the previous discussion, it is important to note that the treatment of Butler's work in this paper is limited in certain ways. It predominantly places Butler's work in the tradition of Hegel and his French interlocutors, while large parts of her work are informed by other philosophers as well, such as Lacan, Levinas, Benjamin, and others (e.g., Butler 2000, 2005, Butler 2020a). In that sense, this paper represents a 'stylized repetition' of her work, intended to delineate her contribution to recognition theory as clearly as possible in a field where Hegel still clearly hovers in the background (e.g., Ferrarese 2011; Harding 2014; Klikauer 2016). For identical reasons, this paper has not engaged deeply with Butler's ideas on gender performativity, although it does hope to add to the 'unfulfilled potential' that Harding et al. (2012: 54) observed a decade ago in the 'limited influence' of Butler's work in organization studies, and although recognition and performativity are by no means mutually exclusive (e.g., Tyler and Vachhani 2021).

Finally, to return to this paper's purpose of to explore theoretically to what extent her views on recognition shed new light on the variety of recognition patterns in current-day organizations, the conclusion must be that under current economic and organizational conditions, freedom and recognition will retain a largely double character. For the Kojèvian Hegel, recognition already constituted a perpetually and dialectically shifting basis for social freedom. For Butler, embedding recognitive relationships within the social norms of current neoliberal society and organizations definitely makes recognition a double-edged sword, conferring freedom and subjection with one and the same mighty sway, and always with a vengeance.

References

Adler, P. S. 2019. *The 99% economy: How democratic socialism can overcome the crises of capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Allen, A. 2006. Dependency, subordination, and recognition: on Judith Butler's theory of subjection. *Continental Philosophy Review* 38(3–4): 199–222.

Althusser, L. 1971. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: notes towards an investigation. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays*, 127–186. New York: Monthly Review. transl. B. Brewster.

Anderson, E. 2017. *Private government: how employers rule our lives (and why we don't talk about it)*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Andersson, L. M., D. Lindebaum, and M. Pérezts. 2019. Book review symposium: Slavery in and around organizations. *Organization Studies* 40(1): 135–149.

Arthur, C. 1983. Hegel's master-slave dialectic and a myth of Marxology. *New Left Review* 142: 67–75.

Badiou, A. 2017. Hegel's master and slave. *Crisis & Critique* 4(1): 34–47.

Bailey, C., and A. Madden. 2019. We're not scum, we're human': agential responses in the face of meaningless work. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 35(4): 1–11.

Benschop, Y. 2021. Grand challenges, feminist answers. *Organization Theory* 2(3): 1–19.

Bertram, G. W., and R. Celikates. 2015. Towards a conflict theory of recognition: on the constitution of relations of recognition in conflict. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23(4): 838–861.

Blanc, E. 2022. Here's how we beat Amazon: An interview with Angelika Maldonado. *Jacobin*, https://jacobin.com/2022/04/amazon-labor-union-alu-staten-island-organizing?mc_cid=7fc1fbb8ed&mc_eid=8af163c56b. Accessed 8 November 2023.

Brincat, S. 2014. Recognition, conflict and the problem of ethical community. *Global Discourse* 4(4): 397–408.

Brown, W. 2015. *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

Butler, J. 1987. *Subjects of desire: hegelian reflections in twentieth-century France*. New York: Columbia University.

Butler, J. 1988. Performative acts and gender constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal* 40(4): 519–531.

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of 'sex'*. New York: Routledge.

Butler, J. 1997. *The psychic life of power: theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Butler, J. 2000. Longing for recognition: Commentary on the work or Jessica Benjamin. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 1(3): 271–290.

Butler, J. 2004. *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.

Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University.

Butler, J. 2009a. *Frames of war. When is life grievable?*. London: Verso.

Butler, J. 2009b. Performativity, precarity and sexual politics. *AIBR Revista De Antropologia Iberoamericana* 4(3): i–xiii.

Butler, J. 2010. Performative agency. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 147–161.

Butler, J. 2012. Can one lead a good life in a bad life? Adorno Prize lecture. *Radical Philosophy* 176: 9–18.

Butler, J. 2015a. *Notes toward a performative theory of assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Butler, J. 2015b. Theatrical machines. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26(5): 23–42.

Butler, J. 2016. Response. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27(4): 529–534.

Butler, J. 2018. Reply from Judith Butler. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96(1): 243–249.

Butler, J. 2020a. *The force of nonviolence: the ethical in the political*. London: Verso.

Butler, J. 2020b. Capitalism has its limits. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits. Accessed 8 November 2023.

Butler, J. 2021. Recognition and the social bond: a response to Axel Honneth. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, eds. H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, and T. Stahl. 31–53. New York: Columbia University.

Butler, J., and W. E. Connolly. 2000. Politics, power and ethics: A discussion between Judith Butler and William Connolly. *Theory & Event* 4(2), https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32589. Accessed 8 November 2023.

Cobben, P. G. 2012. *The paradigm of recognition: freedom as overcoming the fear of death*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

Cooper, C. 2015. Entrepreneurs of the self: the development of management control since 1976. *Accounting Organizations and Society* 47: 14–24.

Costera Meijer, I., and B. Prins. 1998. How bodies come to matter: an interview with Judith Butler. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23(2): 275–286.

De Coster, M., and P. Zanoni. 2019. Governing through accountability: gendered moral selves and the (Im)possibilities of resistance in the neoliberal university. *Gender Work & Organization* 26(4): 411–429.

Deleuze, G. 1995. Postscript on control societies. In *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (transl. M. Joughin), 177–182. New York: Columbia University Press.

Denz, J. 2016. Bondsmen and slaves: servile histories in Hegel and Nietzsche. *History and Theory* 55(3): 357–374.

Ferrarese, E. 2011. Judith Butler's 'not particularly postmodern insight' of recognition. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37(7): 759–773.

Fleming, P. 2014. Review article: when 'life itself' goes to work. Reviewing shifts in organizational life through the lens of biopower. *Human Relations* 67(7): 875–901.

Fleming, P. 2017. The human capital hoax: work, debt and insecurity in the era of uberization. *Organization Studies* 38(5): 691–709.

Foucault, M. 2008. *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (ed. M. Senellart, transl. G. Burchell). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Foucault, M. 2020. [1975]. In *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison (transl. A. Sheridan)*, London: Penguin.

Fukuyama, F. 1992. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free.

Geppert, M., and D. Pastuh. 2017. Total institutions revisited: what can Goffman's approach tell us about 'oppressive' control and 'problematic' conditions of work and employment in contemporary business organizations? *Competition & Change* 21(4): 253–273.

Hägglund, M. 2020. *This life: why mortality makes us free*. London: Profile Books.

Han, B-C. 2017. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power* (transl. E. Butler). London: Verso.

Hancock, P. 2022. Employee recognition programmes: an immanent critique. *Organization*. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084221098244.

Harding, N. 2014. Reading leadership through Hegel's master/slave dialectic: towards a theory of the powerlessness of the powerful. *Leadership* 10(4): 391–411.

Harding, N., J. Ford, and M. Fotaki. 2012. Is the 'F'-word still dirty? A past, present and future of/for feminist and gender studies in Organization. *Organization* 20(1): 51–65.

Hegel, G. W. F. 1977 [1807]. *Phenomenology of spirit* (transl. A.V. Miller). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Honneth, A. 2004. Organized self-realization: some paradoxes of individualization. *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(4): 463–478.

Honneth, A. 2007b. Decentered autonomy: the subject after the fall. In *Disrespect: the normative foundations of critical theory*, 181–193. Cambridge: Polity.

Honneth, A. 2021. Recognition between power and normativity: a hegelian critique of Judith Butler. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, eds. H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, and T. Stahl. 21–30. New York: Columbia University.

Honneth, A. 2007a. Recognition as ideology. In *Recognition and power: Axel Honneth and the tradition of critical social theory*, eds. B. Van den Brink, and D. Owen, 323–347. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Houlgate, S. 1998. Hegel. In *Companion to continental philosophy*, eds. S. Critchley, and W. R. Schroeder. 93–103. Oxford: Blackwell.

Houlgate, S. and G. W. F. Hegel. 2003.: The phenomenology of Spirit. *Blackwell guide to continental philosophy*, eds. R. C. Solomon, and D. Sherman. 8–29. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ikäheimo, H. 2017. Recognition, identity and subjectivity. In *Palgrave handbook of critical theory*, ed. M. J. Thompson. 567–585. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ikäheimo, H., K. Lepold, and T. Stahl. 2021. Introduction. In *Recognition and ambivalence*, eds. H. Ikäheimo, K. Lepold, and T. Stahl. 1–20. New York: Columbia University.

Ingala, E. 2017. Judith Butler: a living engagement with politics (February 2016). *Isegoria: Revista De Filosofia Moral Y Politica* 56: 21–37.

Kellogg, C. 2017. You be my body for me:' dispossession in two valences. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 43(1): 83–95.

Keucheyan, R. 2014. *The left hemisphere: mapping critical theory today*. London: Verso: transl. G. Elliott.

Klikauer, T. 2012. Hegel's philosophy: Ethics, recognition and oppression. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 38(6): 651–658.

Klikauer, T. 2016. Negative recognition: Master and slave in the workplace. *Thesis Eleven* 132(1): 39–49.

Kojève, A. 1969. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (ed. A. Bloom, transl. J.H. Nichols Jr.). New York: Basic Books.

Komporozos-Athanasiou, A., M. Thompson, and M. Fotaki. 2018. Performing accountability in health research: A socio-spatial framework. *Human Relations* 71(9): 1264–1287.

Kristensen, M. L., and A. K. Kristensen. 2023. Taking experiences of disrespectful misrecognition in blended workgroups seriously. *Culture and Organization* 29(2): 139–156.

Larson, R. 2018. *Capitalism vs. freedom: the toll road to serfdom*. Winchester: Zero Books.

Lepold, K. 2018. An ideology critique of recognition: Judith Butler in the context of the contemporary debate on recognition. *Constellations* 25(3): 474–484.

Lilla, M. 2001. *The reckless mind: intellectuals in politics*. New York: New York Review of Books.

Lindebaum, D., and D. Courpasson. 2019. Becoming the next Charlie Parker: rewriting the role of passions in bureaucracies with Whiplash. *Academy of Management Review* 44(1): 1–13.

Lynch, R. A. 2001. Mutual recognition and the dialectic of master and slave: reading Hegel against Kojève. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 41(1): 33–48.

Maia, R. C. M., and D. Cal. 2014. Recognition and ideology: assessing justice and injustice in the case of child domestic labor. *Journal of Political Power* 7(1): 63–85.

Malabou, C., and J. Butler. 2011. You be my body for me: body, shape and plasticity in Hegel's phenomenology of Spirit. In *A companion to Hegel*, eds. S. Houlgate, and M. Baur. 611–640. London: Blackwell.

Mao, J., and Y. A. Xue. 2022. Salvaging adulthood at youth work: dignity, social disrespect, and the micro-politics of recognition in a polarized world. *Organization* 29(6): 1056–1080.

McGowan, T. 2017. Learning to love the end of history: freedom through logic. *Crisis & Critique* 4(1): 252–272.

McKinlay, A. 2010. Performativity and the politics of identity: putting Butler to work. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21(3): 232–242.

McQueen, P. 2015. Honneth, Butler and the ambivalent effects of recognition. *Res Publica* 21(1): 43–60.

Messner, M. 2009. The limits of accountability. *Accounting Organizations and Society* 34(8): 918–938.

Moore, P., and A. Robinson. 2016. The quantified self: what counts in the neoliberal workplace. *New Media & Society* 18(11): 2774–2792.

Painter-Morland, M. 2006. Redefining accountability as relational responsiveness. *Journal of Business Ethics* 66(1): 89–98.

Petherbridge, D. 2016. What's critical about vulnerability? Rethinking interdependence, recognition, and power. *Hypathia* 31(3): 589–604.

Phillips, L., and M. Rozworski. 2019. *People's republic of Walmart: how the world's biggest corporations are laying the foundation for socialism*. London: Verso.

Robbins, B. 2001. I couldn't possibly love such a person': Judith Butler on Hegel. *Minnesota Review* 52–54: 263–269.

Roberts, J. 2009. No one is perfect: the limits of transparency and an ethic for 'intelligent' accountability. *Accounting Organizations and Society* 34(8): 957–970.

Roth, M. S. 1985. A problem of recognition: Alexandre Kojève and the end of history. *History and Theory* 24(3): 293–306.

Schippers, B. 2015. Violence, affect and ethics. In *Butler and ethics*, ed. M. Lloyd. 91–117. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University.

Schneider, A. 2020. Bound to fail? Exploring the systemic pathologies of CSR and their implications for CSR research. *Business & Society* 59(7): 1303–1338.

Sebrechts, M., E. Tonkens, and B. Da Roit. 2019. Unfolding recognition: an empirical-theoretical contribution to the concept. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 20(2): 173–189.

Shattuc, W. 2022. I got fired for unionizing at Starbucks. And I'd do it again: An interview with Emma Chambers. *Jacobin*, https://jacobin.com/2022/07/starbucks-union-workers-united-firing-union-busting?mc_cid=b1e6a8461d&mc_eid=8af163c56b. Accessed 8 November 2023.

Sikka, P., and H. Willmott. 2010. The dark side of transfer pricing: its role in tax avoidance and wealth retentiveness. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21(4): 342–356.

Singer, P. 2001. *Hegel: a very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sobel, R. 2015. Work, recognition and subjectivization: some remarks about the modernity of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. *Journal of Philosophical Economics* 8(2): 22–42.

Stark, H. 2014. Judith Butler's post-hegelian ethics and the problem with recognition. *Feminist Theory* 15(1): 89–100.

Tweedie, D. 2020. Why work? What does philosophy (not) tell us about worker motivation? In *Handbook of philosophy of management*, eds. C. Neesham, and S. Segal. 1–17. Cham: Springer.

Tyler, M. 2020. *Judith Butler and organization theory*. New York: Routledge.

Tyler, M., and S. Vachhani. 2021. Chasing rainbows? A recognition-based critique of Primark's precarious commitment to inclusion. *Organization* 28(2): 247–265.

Vandekerckhove, W. 2021. Kenny's *whistleblowing* and Stanger's *whistleblowers*. *Philosophy of Management* 20(1): 93–98.

Visser, M., and T. C. Arnold. 2022. Recognition and work in the platform economy: a normative reconstruction. *Philosophy of Management* 21(1): 31–45.

Willig, R. 2012. Recognition and critique: an interview with Judith Butler. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13(1): 139–144.

Yar, M. 2001. Recognition and the politics of human(e) desire. *Theory Culture & Society* 18(2–3): 57–76.

Max Visser is Associate Professor of Management, Accounting and Organization, Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. His research in-terests include organizational learning, behavior and control, from both descriptive and nor-mative / philosophical perspectives, on which subjects he has published in journals like *Acad-emy of Management Review, Management Learning, Journal of Business Ethics, Philosophy of Management and Human Resource Management Review*, among others.