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# REVIEW

## **Paul Ricoeur 2005.** *The Course of Recognition.* London, England and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Orig. *Parcours de la reconnaissance* 2004. Translated by David Pellauer, 297.

### Arto Laitinen

What do people want when they want to be "recognized"? Do they want more than just to be correctly "identified"? Do we recognize other humans somehow differently from how we identify things in general? What is recognition concerning oneself?

These are questions that Paul Ricoeur (1913 - 2005) poses in the book that was to be his last. Throughout his lengthy and prolific career (he published more than 500 essays and tens of books) the topic of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition figured in his works visibly, but often only in the background, so it is only fitting that he dedicated a book-length study to the topic. The book is based on lectures he gave in Vienna and Freiburg. It is probably not one of Ricoeur's master pieces: the relation of many passages to the overall theme of the book is left a bit unclear. Yet there are plenty of sharp observations, illuminating comparisons, and typically for his work, suggestive overall architecture.

Ricoeur's usage of "recognition" is much broader than is customary in the debates about politics of identity and difference, which have "most contributed to popularising the theme of recognition, at the risk of turning it into something banal."(212). He thinks that the kind of social standing related to cultural differences is only one of various species of mutual recognition, and furthermore, *mutual recognition* in all its forms differs from two other kinds of recognition discussed in the book. The other two are discussed in the first two chapters of the book: first, *identification of anything* as the thing that it is, and secondly *recognition of oneself* as a capable agent.

Ricoeur starts from an observation that although there are libraries full of books on theories of knowledge, there are no corresponding theories of "recognition". Recognition has surfaced only in a couple of "thought events" in the history of philosophy: Kant uses the term *Rekognition* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bergson discusses recognition of oneself in memory, and young Hegel discusses *Anerkennung* in a social context. These seem to be about very different things. Ricoeur wants to show that the topic of recognition has some unity, at least some "rule-governed polysemy", which links these and other "thought events", whether or not the term was explicitly used in them. As it happens, Kant's *Rekognition* turns out to be a disappointment for Ricoeur; and Bergson is discussed only for a couple of pages; but many minor occurrences of "recognition" are reported along the way. There are some surprising omissions as well: Fichte or Hegel's *Phenomenology* are not even mentioned. (And perhaps less surprisingly, Ricoeur does not much engage with analytical philosophy. It might have been relevant especially in the first chapter.)

Ricoeur introduces his topic by asking what dictionaries might tell us about the unity of "recognition", or *reconnaissance*. This section of the book works surprisingly well in English translation: the meanings of the French word are mostly covered by the English one, the main difference being that "gratitude" is much more central in the French term. (By contrast, there is no neat translation to German, for example: neither *anerkennen* or *wiedererkennen* covers the whole scope).

Here's one way of summing up the various (more than 20) meanings of the word mentioned in the dictionaries that Ricoeur goes through.[1] There is, first, a family of meanings related to identification of things. We can identify familiar people and objects directly by their holistic style or bearing, or we can identify things for the first time by some mark. Second, there is a family of meanings related to accepting some claim or document as true or valid. Thirdly, there is a family of senses in which recognition concerns people. To recognize can be for example "to bear witness through gratitude that one is indebted to someone for (something, an act)" or "to accept (a person) as a leader, master" and the recognized person can be "someone who is declared to possess a certain quality". One may note in passing that Ricoeur's "recognition of oneself" does not figure in the dictionaries discussed.[2] Furthermore, recognition as accepting as true or valid seems to be more prominent than Ricoeur notes. Thus, an alternative "course" of recognition might as well move from recognition-identification to recognition-acceptance as true or valid ("recognition-adhesion" (211)) and then to what Ricoeur calls "recognition-attestation" of oneself and others.

In Chapter One, "Recognition as Identification", Ricoeur discusses Descartes, Kant and phenomenologists from Husserl to Merleau–Ponty. It emerges that identification is threatened not only by mistaking some individual thing for some other individual thing, but also by a failure to construe something as an individual thing at all. Although it is not explicitly stressed by Ricoeur, one can say that these two kinds of failures of identification may be relevant in political contexts. People sometimes see "groups" where there really are – or should be – none (and there may be struggles aiming at dissolving the very idea that the *x*s form a unified group), or people may fail to perceive groups which do demand positive recognition as a group, and sometimes of course people mistake some groups or individuals for others (so that they may buy the idea that Saddam Hussein might be responsible for Al-Qaeda's deeds).

All and all, there seem to be five themes discussed under the topic of *recognition as identification*: i) identification as a synthesis (say, perceiving a shape and not just dots; perceiving a material body and not just profiles and silhouettes; a forest and not just trees), which may be quite automatic in the case of human persons, but not so in the case of recognizing groups; ii) identification as distinguishing something from other things, for example identifying a person as the individual that she is; iii) identification on the basis of marks versus on the basis of more holistic "style", iv) the relevance of presence, disappearing and reappearing, and change and v) (with Descartes) the topic of accepting "an idea" as true.

Chapter Two introduces an important presupposition to the debates about mutual recognition: the fact that we are able to act, that we are *capable agents*, and therefore capable of taking responsibility. The chapter links up with Ricoeur's earlier analysis (in *Oneself as Another*, 1990, Engl. transl. 1992) of the kind of certitude with which we recognize that we have various capacities as agents. It differs from descriptive "identification" as discussed in the first chapter. The type of recognition in question is "attestation", expressed by self-assertions such as "*I believe that I can*", and implicit in anything that we do. There is really no discussion of the sense of recognizing one's identity, of who one is in particular (and not merely the fact that, like others, one is a capable, responsible agent). This is surprising, given Ricoeur's famous earlier analyses of *ipse*-identity and narrative identity, which no doubt are related to recognition of oneself.

In reading Chapter Two it is easy to lose the thread. Ricoeur first discusses Greek texts and agrees with Bernard Williams's thesis that a cultural constant about humans as "centers of agency" and as responsible actors can be found in the Greek texts. The next section, entitled "A Phenomenology of the Capable Human Being", introduces the topic of recognizing oneself as an agent, as having various capacities to speak, to act, to narrate, and to take responsibility. This section covers the main themes of Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* in a rather dense manner. The third section is entitled "Memory and Promises", which also covers themes from his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000, Engl. transl. 2004). Ricoeur points out, following Bergson, that there is an implicit recognition of self in recognizing images or memories. And there is a peculiar kind of persistence of self that takes place in promises: even if my inclinations would change in the future, I now commit myself to doing something then. This is crucial for Ricoeur's idea that *idem*-identity (identity as sameness) and *ipse*-identity (identity as selfhood) are in a dialectical relationship. The last section in the second chapter is entitled "Capacities and Social Practices". It first discusses social practices and collective representations, and then discusses how Ricoeur's capacities relate to Sen's capability approach.

*Chapter Three* is no doubt the main part of the book, and it manages to create the sense of philosophical aporias that characterizes Ricoeur's best work. Ricoeur starts by discussing the asymmetry of the self and the other, by referring to Husserl and Levinas who give directly opposed versions of the dissymmetry. Ricoeur's point is to warn against forgetting the real dissymmetries in the search for mutuality between the self and the other.

After this initial warning, Ricoeur discusses Hobbes's challenge to political philosophy, and interprets Hegel's notion of *Anerkennung* as a response to Hobbes. For Hegel "the desire for recognition occupies the place held in the Hobbesian conception of the state of nature by the fear of a violent death."(152). Ricoeur does not discuss the most famous passages on recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but focuses solely on Hegel's earlier texts. In this, Ricoeur follows Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*.

Ricoeur engages in a lengthy and interesting commentary on Axel Honneth's work. In Ricoeur's view "the correlation between the three models of recognition inherited from Hegel and the negative forms of disregard" is "the most important contribution by Honneth's book to the theory of recognition in its post-Hegelian phase."(188). "The three models of recognition provide the speculative structure, while the negative sentiments give flesh and blood to the struggle for recognition."(188).

The first form of recognition, love, is "constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people"(Honneth, 95; Ricoeur, 188). This is a pre-juridical form of reciprocal recognition where "subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to their concrete needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures."(Honneth 95; Ricoeur 189). Such attachments are inconsistent with direct violations of physical integrity (as Honneth stresses), or negations of approbation (as Ricoeur stresses) that indirectly affect a person's basic self-confidence. "Humiliation, experienced as the withdrawal or refusal of such approbation, touches everyone at the prejuridical level of his or her "being-with" others. The individual feels looked down on from above, even taken as insignificant. Deprived of approbation, the person is as if nonexistent."(191).

The second form of recognition, universal respect, is institutionalised in *legal recognition of rights*. Corresponding to different kinds of rights, there are various specific forms of disrespect. The humiliation that relates to a denial of civil rights is different from denial of political rights, or welfare rights.(200).

The third form of recognition concerns the social dimension of politics, *Sittlichkeit* in its broadest sense, which is irreducible to juridical ties. The concept of *social esteem* differs from self-respect and self-confidence and "functions to sum up all the modes of mutual recognition that exceed the mere recognition of the equality of rights among free subjects."(202). It is a matter of "the notions that go with the idea of social esteem, such as prestige or consideration"(202). People need recognition of "the importance of their individual qualities for the life of others."(202).

Ricoeur then turns to a very fruitful addition to Honneth's analysis of struggles for esteem. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot[3] speak of *justification* as "the strategy by which competitors give credence to their respective places in … economies of standing".(205). People's standing can be evaluated to be great or small in the light of qualifying tests specific to different contexts, which Boltanski and Thevenot call "cities" or "worlds". "In each case, the evaluation of performances is based on a battery of tests that the protagonists must pass in competitive situation, if they are to be said to be "justified""(205).

They name six different contexts. "For example, there is the question of "inspired greatness" as applied to artists and other creative individuals."(205). There is a "*city of inspiration*" illustrated by Saint Augustine's *City of God*. What matters is grace as distinguished from vainglory. "In this city, no credit is accorded to recognition by others, at least in terms of renown."(207). "But renown is precisely what the *city of opinion* refers to, in which standing depends only on the opinions of others. Ties of personal dependence are what decide one's importance in the eyes of others. Here honor depends on the credit conferred by other people."(207). In addition, they enumerate the domestic, civic, commercial and industrial cities with rival standards of social standing. One may note that *all* such standings compete with private pleasures, and the pattern of justification that hedonists may have in the eyes of one another. Some people may just not care about inspirational greatness and so on, but want a private life with private pleasures.

There are feelings of injustice for example when such tests are corrupted, and differences of opinion arise, and the "worlds" may also challenge and even invalidate each others. There is a typology of types of criticism directed by one world to another: "What is the standing of a great industrialist in the eyes of a great orchestra director? The capacity to become great in another world may even be eclipsed by success in some order of standing" (209). But one may note that perhaps this is balanced by the tendency of elites to form clubs.

As ways of responding to such disagreements between and within worlds, Boltanski and Thevenot favour figures of compromise over those of consensus (206). Ricoeur stresses the capacity of persons to understand a world other than one's own. Ricoeur suggests that the model of compromise is superior to for example Charles Taylor's insistence that mutual recognition must deal with genuine value judgements. Ricoeur stresses however that the vertical role of state, political power, and issues of authority must be added to the claims put forward by Honneth and Thevenot & Boltanski.

Ultimately Ricoeur wants to question the importance of the idea of "struggle" that Hobbes, Hegel, Honneth and Thevenot & Boltanski all give central place. Ricoeur asks: "when, we may ask, does a subject deem him- or herself to be truly recognized?"(217). Ricoeur sees that this might be an insatiable quest. "Does not the claim for affective, juridical and social recognition, through its militant, conflictual style, end up as an indefinite demand, a kind of "bad infinity""(218)?

At first sight Ricoeur's worry may seem out of place. Surely "being recognized" is the state that follows when the demands for respect, social esteem and so on are being adequately met. Perhaps he has in mind the idea that when the present demands have been met, there will always be new ones (as attested to by the expansion of demands for new kinds of rights). In addition, there are more and less peaceful ways in which normative demands can be met, as illustrated by the way disputes are settled in courts: "the judge thus appears as bearing not only the scales of justice but a sword. The dispute is settled, but it is merely spared of vengeance, without yet being a state of peace."(223).

To answer this worry, Ricoeur looks for circumstances, which would reveal the possibility of genuine recognition in a particularly convincing manner. Ricoeur looks for actual experiences of "states of peace" to get confirmation that the moral motivation for struggles for recognition is not illusory. (218). Ricoeur takes practices of giving and receiving gifts to be such an exemplary context. Ricoeur's main point in discussing gift-giving is to stress the role of *gratitude* as a response to a gift. Giving a gift in return is not the first response, nor is there a mechanic need to reciprocate: gratitude is as such an adequate way of establishing mutuality. A central meaning of the French word "reconnaissance" is gratitude, and Ricoeur's observations about gift-giving and gratitude are among the highlights of this book.

Exchange of gifts illuminates two central aspects of mutual recognition. The first is "the irreplaceable character of each of the partners in the exchange. The one is not the other. We exchange gifts, but not places."(263). The second is the difference of mutual recognition from any form of fusional union, whether in love or friendship: "A just distance is maintained at the heart of mutuality, a just distance that integrates respect into intimacy."(263).

The main claims of the last chapter are hard to resist: that we should not exaggerate possibilities of mutuality or forget the original asymmetry of the self and the other, or that we should not forget the role of vertical power relations in discussing the struggles for recognition, but at the same time, we should not deny that at least fleeting experiences of genuine mutual recognition are possible (even in an imperfect world).

## NOTES

**1.** He uses *Grand Robert de la langue francaise* (2nd ed 1985, edited by Alain Rey), *Littre's Dictionaire de la langue francaise* (1859-1872).

**2.** The English Merriam-Webster dictionary does have an entry for "*self-recognition*": "recognition of one's own self; or the process by which the immune system of an organism distinguishes between the body's own chemicals, cells, and tissues and those of foreign organisms and agents."

**3.** In *On Justification: Economies of Worth.* Princeton UP 2006.