

## Recension

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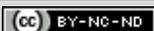
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## Recension

Michael Sohn, *The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Religion in the Thought of Lévinas and Ricœur* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), pp. 160.

The focus of Michael Sohn's book is "the treatment of the Hegelian concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*)" in the works of Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricœur (ix). Sohn's objective is twofold: (a) he wants to show that this Hegelian concept is to be found throughout their works, which in Ricœur's case means from as early as *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (1947) and *Gabriel Marcel et Karl Jaspers: Philosophe du mystère et philosophe du paradoxe* (1948) right through to *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004); and (b) he wants to construct an argument in support of the claim that the concept of recognition "plays an important role in their thought at the intersection of phenomenology, ethics, politics, and religion" (ix).

Sohn clearly has very definite views on the best way to proceed when interpreting Lévinas' and Ricœur's works and in particular their thoughts on recognition. He insists that they can be properly understood only "by situating them within the philosophical and theological context of the day" (1). If by "philosophical and theological context" he means intellectual context, Sohn's approach is not dissimilar to that of Quentin Skinner. Indeed, the experience of reading Sohn's book is not very different from listening to Skinner lecture on Hobbes. Sohn and Skinner both offer scholarly accounts of the intellectual resources that were available to the named philosophers (Sohn's Lévinas and Ricœur and Skinner's Hobbes) when they set about addressing an issue that was of concern to them (Lévinas' and Ricœur's desire to bring an end to "social discrimination and political persecution" (1) and Hobbes concern to legitimize a particular form of government). As is well known, Skinner takes this approach with a view to reaching a *historical* understanding of texts and concepts, eschewing any suggestion that what he is dealing with are timeless philosophical works or deracinated concepts. And the same could be said of Sohn even if he is more inclined to underscore the second term in the phrase, "historical understanding": "This study has employed a historical and analytical approach to understanding the concept of recognition in Emmanuel Lévinas' and Paul Ricœur's works" (123).

In the opening chapter of the book Sohn notes that "Emmanuel Lévinas and Paul Ricœur belonged to a generation that experienced acute feelings of both nonrecognition and misrecognition" (1). These feelings arose in the context of witnessing and experiencing "the [modern] malaise of anonymity," and "invidious forms of social discrimination and political persecution." Sohn then goes on to discuss "the intellectual sources" that were available to Lévinas and Ricœur when they first began to articulate their responses to "these social and political forces." On Sohn's account, the primary intellectual source was Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as it was interpreted by French commentators in the 1930s and 1940s. The account he offers of the "main thinkers and their arguments" (3) sets the scene for a demonstration of the extent to which the early intellectual biographies of Lévinas and Ricœur intersect with certain "towering figures in French thought" (5). Sohn points out that Lévinas attended Alexandre Koyré's seminars on Hegel in the 1930s; and it was Koyré who supervised his translation of Edmund

Husserl's *Cartesianische Meditationen*. He also notes that Lévinas' doctoral studies were supervised by Jean Wahl. However, the evidence that Sohn produces in support of the claim that "Ricœur's early intellectual biography intersects with the key figures who contributed to the revival of Hegel studies in France" (8) is less compelling. He points to Ricœur's acknowledgement that Kojève's interpretation of Hegelian phenomenology played a role in opening "the way for all the anthropological applications of dialectics which were incorporated into French phenomenology" (quoted on page 8). Ricœur's own phenomenology would clearly fall into that category. Sohn finds some additional support for his claim in a statement that Ricœur makes regarding the contribution that the return to "the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*" made to French philosophy in general. But, apparently unable to find evidence of any *personal* connection between Ricœur and the great French interpreters of Hegel, Sohn turns to the content of "Ricœur's personal library" (n.8) where, as he observes, there are copies of works by Kojève, Hyppolite, and Wahl to be found.

Sohn is probably on more solid ground when he declares that Ricœur was not interested in establishing what Hegel "really said," but wanted to bring "the insights of recent Hegel studies in critical conversation [...] with the thought of Karl Jaspers and Edmund Husserl" (8). He will devote the fourth chapter of his book to discussing the manner in which Ricœur brought existentialism and phenomenology together, claiming that this synthesis effectively "rearticulated and reinterpreted Hegel's concept of *Anerkennung*" (11). However, before he gets to that point he wants to outline a second category of intellectual source that was available to Lévinas and Ricœur at the start of their intellectual journeys: "theological sources." Under that heading, Sohn endeavours to situate Lévinas' thought "within a certain social and political history of Jewish life in France during the nineteenth and early twentieth century," the objective being to understand what was at stake in Lévinas' "reconceptualization of recognition" (12). As Sohn presents him, Lévinas was concerned for the future of Judaism, which he believed hinged "not so much on the struggle for political existence but primarily on the cultivation of [...] cultural Judaism" (13-4). Similarly, Sohn tries to situate Ricœur's thought "within the Protestant Christian tradition" (14). He notes that, like Lévinas, Ricœur "holds a strong commitment to universal political and legal recognition while at the same time cultivating and renewing particular religious identity" (15).

Sohn devotes Chapters Two and Three to an examination of Lévinas' understanding and use of the concept of recognition. He discusses Ricœur's understanding and use of the same "Hegelian concept" in Chapters Four and Five. The argument presented in Chapter Two echoes the approach to interpreting Lévinas made famous by Jean-Luc Marion. That is to say, it proceeds on the assumption that there is "a series of reductions" in Lévinas' phenomenology, which ultimately leads to "his distinct concept of recognition" (n.20). The first of the reductions leads the researcher back from naturalistic theories to "the Husserlian phenomenological theory of cognition," a staging post that, for Lévinas at least, has both "insights and oversights" (20). The second reduction takes the inquiry back beyond the problems of abstraction and solipsism that Lévinas identifies in an otherwise insightful Husserlian phenomenology to a "primarily axiological and practical" version of the same method (25), i.e., Lévinas' own.

Sohn's accounts of Husserl's critique of naturalism and Lévinas' critical appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology are examples of the very finest expository writing. Most readers will certainly feel that they have learned something about those challenging topics after reading

Sohn's accounts. However, it is his account of "Lévinas' ethical understanding of the recognition of the other" (29) that is likely to prove the most thought provoking. "For heuristic purposes" Sohn elucidates that phenomenon "by considering [its] 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects" (29). Commenting on the latter, he notes that Lévinas entertained "a much broader construal of [Descartes'] ego cogito – and thus a much broader understanding of subjectivity and cognition" (34) than Kant had done. He writes: "Within this broadened interpretation of the ego cogito and its multiple modalities, including will, perception, memory, imagination, and judgment, Lévinas highlights the place of sensation" (35). He acknowledges that Lévinas was following Husserl's lead when he adopted a broad interpretation of the ego cogito. But he argues that in doing so he discovered "a primordial notion of subjectivity" that had been neglected by Husserl and others: "Not only is sensation merely one among many modes of the ego cogito but, on his reading of Descartes, it is also the most primordial and fundamental" (35).

When Sohn underscores the importance of Descartes' *Second Meditation* for Lévinas' conceptualization of subjectivity as sensation he not only clarifies one side of Levinas' ethical understanding of the recognition of the other, he also establishes "an important point of comparison when considering the thought of Ricœur, who employs his own method of reduction, but to the modality of the will" (35). Chapter Four sets out to demonstrate that Ricœur's early writings, "from roughly the late 1940s to the 1960s," are crucial to understanding his later work on the ethics of recognition (67). Sohn argues that those early writings see Ricœur appropriate "the Hegelian concept of *Anerkennung* through the new approaches and insights in the existentialism of Karl Jaspers and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl" (67). However, this line of argumentation tends to obscure the exciting point of comparison with Lévinas. Instead of focusing attention on the way Ricœur leads the reflection back to subjectivity as will, it obliges Sohn to analyze the way Ricœur uses Jaspers' "magisterial three-volume work entitled simply *Philosophy*" as a resource for articulating a reaction against "'the philosophy of things' and the 'philosophy of ideas'" (69). But as Sohn acknowledges, Jaspers' work "only briefly alludes to the notion of the will and the question of voluntary and involuntary acts. Ricœur develops the issue of the will and significantly complicates Jaspers' notion of freedom through the insights of phenomenology" (72-3). Sohn's subsequent analysis of *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950) suggests that it was "Husserlian phenomenology" that allowed Ricœur to integrate "the voluntary and the involuntary" aspects of the will (73). However, this may be to downplay the extent of innovation in Ricœur's reconciling freedom with such heterogeneous regions as the body and the unconscious. It certainly serves to further obscure the promising comparison that Sohn wants to make between Lévinas and Ricœur. Indeed, the better approach might have been to emphasize the degree to which Ricœur followed Lévinas in critiquing "Husserlian phenomenology" through the use of a signature reappraisal of Descartes' *Second Meditation*.

As I already mentioned, Chapter Four sets out to demonstrate that Ricœur's early writings, "from roughly the late 1940s to the 1960s," are crucial to understanding his later work on the ethics of recognition (67). Sohn holds that, "Recognition is a central, connecting thread throughout Ricœur's works from his early writings on descriptive phenomenology of recognition through his later prescriptive ethics of recognition and what might be called his 'politics of recognition,'" claiming that, for Ricœur, "The ethics of mutual recognition [...] is inextricably linked to the issue of the constitution of selfhood and the overarching problematic of capacities and human freedom" (93). This is undoubtedly the case. However, Sohn does not appear to place

any weight on Ricœur's suggestion that "recognition as identification," "recognizing oneself" and "mutual recognition" are three distinct concepts stemming from three very different sources. As Ricœur clearly demonstrates in *The Course of Recognition*, "recognition as identification" is the Kantian concept of *Rekognition*; "recognizing oneself" is the Bergsonian concept of *reconnaissance*; and "mutual recognition" is the Hegelian concept of *Anerkennung*. It seems to me that it is important to keep this complex genealogy in mind when considering the sources of Ricœur's thought and his philosophy of recognition in particular. Of course, to be fair, Ricœur did indicate that there was an "unsaid" hidden in the "folds" of both the meaning of "recognition as identification" and the meaning of "recognizing oneself," which would seem to suggest that his primary objective, in *The Course of Recognition*, was to unfold the hidden concept of "mutual recognition." This could be viewed as support for the line of inquiry that Sohn has taken. But, for me, there is still a question to consider with regard the point that Ricœur was making when he presented such an elaborate system of meanings with its diverse genealogical sources: Kantian, Bergsonian and Hegelian. Although the system reminds one of the Russian nesting doll or Matryoshka, one is probably not entirely at liberty to discard the first and second meanings in order to focus exclusively on the third, examining its provenance and discussing the way it has been re-conceptualized.

Criticisms apart, this is a very exciting book. Its sophisticated and scholarly approach facilitates a genuine understanding of two seminal appropriations of the Hegelian concept of recognition; it provides valuable insights into the French reception and critical appropriation of Husserlian phenomenology; and it establishes interesting connections between the philosophical and theological writings of two major figures in continental philosophy. It will surely make a significant contribution to the secondary literature on both Lévinas and Ricœur.