

## From Struggle to Gift: Ricœur on Recognition

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### Abstract

By analyzing recognition in terms of the gift, Ricœur calls into question the concept of the struggle for recognition. For the gift does not seem to be the kind of thing that can be struggled for. But why should recognition be conceived in terms of the gift in the first place? I argue that Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift can be developed from the tensions in the concept of the struggle for recognition as seen in Hegel's lord-bondsman dialectic. This dialectic leads to the conclusion that the other must be allowed to go free in order for their recognition to be of value to the person receiving it. Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift radicalizes this concern for the other's freedom by conceiving of recognition as something that we receive without even asking for it – namely, as a gift.

**Keywords:** Ricœur; Honneth; Hegel; struggle for recognition; lord-bondsman dialectic; gift.

### Résumé

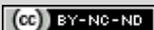
En analysant la reconnaissance en termes de don, Ricœur remet en question le concept de lutte pour la reconnaissance, car le don ne semble pas être quelque chose pour lequel on peut lutter. Mais pourquoi la reconnaissance devrait-elle être conçue en termes de don en premier lieu ? Je soutiens que l'analyse de la reconnaissance par Ricœur sous l'angle du don peut être développée à partir des tensions inhérentes au concept de lutte pour la reconnaissance, telles qu'elles apparaissent dans la dialectique du maître et du serviteur chez Hegel. Cette dialectique conduit à la conclusion que l'autre doit être libre afin que sa reconnaissance ait une véritable valeur pour la personne qui la reçoit. L'analyse de Ricœur radicalise cette préoccupation pour la liberté de l'autre en concevant la reconnaissance comme quelque chose que nous recevons sans même l'avoir demandé – à savoir, comme un don.

**Mots-clés :** Ricœur; Honneth; Hegel; lutte pour la reconnaissance; dialectique du maître et du serviteur; don.

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# From Struggle to Gift: Ricœur on Recognition

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## The Struggle for Recognition

The concept of *the struggle for recognition* is at the center of the contemporary debate on recognition. Honneth's monograph on the topic<sup>1</sup> had a significant impact on this debate and some of the most important contemporary theories of recognition mainly consist in analyses of different kinds of struggles for recognition.<sup>2</sup>

In his own theory of recognition, Ricœur emphasizes his indebtedness to Honneth<sup>3</sup> and the ongoing debate on recognition. He discusses the historical precursors to, as well as the main figures in, this debate.<sup>4</sup> However, Ricœur also distances himself from the contemporary debate on recognition in various ways. Indeed, one of the most telling differences between Ricœur's work and recent theories of recognition is the fact that Ricœur *casts doubt on* and *calls into question* the very concept of the struggle for recognition. Thus, at the beginning of his theory of recognition, Ricœur writes: "We shall follow [the attempts to reactualize the Hegelian theme under the heading 'The Struggle for Recognition'] to the point where doubt arises concerning the very idea of a struggle."<sup>5</sup> And after discussing these attempts, he concludes: "At the end of our consideration of the figures of the struggle of recognition, I would like to question the importance of the idea of struggle at each stage along the way."<sup>6</sup>

Ricœur also speaks of "the problem of struggle"<sup>7</sup> and notes the development of "a certain sense of unease (...) with regard to the claims attaching to the very idea of a struggle."<sup>8</sup> This prompts

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<sup>1</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003); Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 174, 186. – In my discussion of Ricœur's theory of recognition, I will focus on this book. It should be noted, however, that the concept of recognition is discussed in Ricœur's earlier works as well (see, e.g., Paul Ricœur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 121–2; Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 296).

<sup>4</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 150–216.

<sup>5</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 153.

<sup>6</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 216.

<sup>7</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 188.

<sup>8</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 217.

him to look for an “argument directed against the exclusive emphasis on the idea of a struggle”<sup>9</sup> and to seek out an “alternative to the idea of struggle.”<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I will show how Ricœur’s sense of unease with regard to the concept of the struggle for recognition stems from the new perspective he opens in the contemporary debate on recognition by conceiving of recognition in terms of the *gift*. Thus, unlike in my previous work on the issue,<sup>11</sup> I will focus on establishing how Ricœur’s “doubt (...) concerning the very idea of a struggle”<sup>12</sup> can be developed from his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift. More specifically, I will draw on Ricœur’s account of the gift in return and his emphasis on the element of surprise that accompanies the gift in order to show that the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, simply is not the kind of thing that can be struggled for. The gift eludes the struggle. Then, I will relate Ricœur’s theory of recognition to Hegel’s lord-bondsman dialectic, with a particular focus on Williams’ interpretation of Hegel, since Williams is probably the contemporary recognition theorist whose intuitions are closest to those of Ricœur. Nevertheless, I will show that Ricœur’s theory of recognition goes significantly beyond that of Williams and is not anticipated by him. In the end, I will develop a new interpretation of the role that reciprocity plays in Ricœur’s theory of recognition, thereby expanding on my previous work on the issue.<sup>13</sup> I will argue against Williams’ teleological interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return and defend a compatibilist interpretation instead. The gift is thus compatible with the gift in return but does not have it as its goal. As a result, recognition does not have to be reciprocal.

Before I get to these issues, however, I will first give an outline of Ricœur’s theory of recognition. I will begin with the justification that he himself gives for his sense of unease with regard to the concept of the struggle for recognition. Then, I will develop my own. Ricœur writes:

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”? This question has to do not only with the negative feelings that go with a lack of recognition, but also with the acquired abilities, thereby handed over to an insatiable quest. The temptation here is a new form of the “unhappy consciousness,” as either an incurable sense of victimization or the indefatigable postulation of unattainable ideals.<sup>14</sup>

Ricœur’s assumption thus seems to be that the struggle for recognition always gets out of hand and never comes to an end, that it creates the feeling of being a victim and leads to unattainable demands.

This is a surprisingly pessimistic take. And *prima facie*, it does not seem to be clear why one should support it: *Why* should the struggle for recognition always get out of hand? And *why* should it always lead to unattainable demands? Thus, in view of Ricœur’s pessimism, Laitinen

<sup>9</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 186.

<sup>10</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Wehinger, “Anerkennung als Gabe: Eine kritische Analyse von Paul Ricœurs Anerkennungstheorie,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Philosophie*, vol. 146, n° 3 (2024), 352–79, <https://doi.org/10.35070/ztp.v146i3.4200>.

<sup>12</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Wehinger, “Anerkennung als Gabe.”

<sup>14</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

emphasizes that “any normative demand has its conditions of satisfaction built into it.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, “each demand is in principle limited: the demand in question does not require anything more than what it demands.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, according to Laitinen, the struggle for recognition does not *have* to be “indefinite,” “insatiable,” etc.<sup>17</sup> It *may well* get out of hand, but it is not at all obvious that it *must* do so. In light of this, Laitinen underscores that “Ricœur’s worry (...) seems out of place. ‘Being adequately recognized’ is the state that follows when the demands for respect, social esteem and so on are being adequately met, and when that is achieved, all parties may rest content.”<sup>18</sup>

I agree with Laitinen’s contention that Ricœur’s sense of unease over the concept of the struggle for recognition seems to be insufficiently justified. The reasons that Ricœur gives for this sense of unease seem overly pessimistic and unconvincing. However, I also believe that Ricœur’s sense of unease can be justified in a more convincing way and given a more solid foundation. I will attempt to demonstrate this in what follows.<sup>19</sup>

## Agape and the Gift

To reach my objective here, I will first give an outline of Ricœur’s theory of recognition. The point of departure of this theory is Ricœur’s analysis of the concept of *agape*. Ricœur thus introduces the classical distinction between “*philia* (in the Aristotelian sense), *eros* (in the Platonic sense), and *agape* (in the biblical and postbiblical sense).”<sup>20</sup> He goes on to describe *agape* in an almost exuberant way, speaking of “the overflowing heart”<sup>21</sup> and the “superabundance”<sup>22</sup> that characterizes *agape* and that “renders unnecessary the reference to equivalents because it knows nothing of comparison and calculation.”<sup>23</sup> He also writes:

Calculation falls away along with judgment; and with calculation, all worry. The insouciance of *agape* is what allows it to suspend a dispute. (...) The forgetting of offenses

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<sup>15</sup> Arto Laitinen, “Paul Ricœur’s Surprising Take on Recognition,” *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, vol. 2, n° 1 (2011), 45, <https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2011.57>.

<sup>16</sup> Laitinen, “Paul Ricœur’s Surprising Take on Recognition,” 45.

<sup>17</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

<sup>18</sup> Laitinen, “Paul Ricœur’s Surprising Take on Recognition,” 46.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Honneth seems to disagree with Laitinen. Thus, he claims that “norms of recognition (...) have a normative surplus, an inbuilt normative demand, that we will never really be able to fully institutionalize” (Gonçalo Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory Today: An Interview with Axel Honneth,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 39, n° 2 (2013), 217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453712470361>). Yet, unlike Ricœur, Honneth takes the infinite demand that results from this normative surplus to be a “productive infinity” (Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory Today,” 217) rather than “a kind of ‘bad infinity’” (Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218). As he also puts it: “We as human beings have a permanent demand imposed on ourselves, a demand to make things better. And I don’t see why that should be considered bad. (...) I think that an infinite demand is a productive requirement for us to live our everyday lives in interaction” (Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory Today,” 217).

<sup>20</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>21</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>22</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>23</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

that it inspires does not consist in setting them aside, still less in repressing them, but in “letting go,” to use one of Hannah Arendt’s phrases in speaking of pardon.<sup>24</sup>

The core feature of agape in Ricœur’s theory of recognition, however, is the fact that agape *gives without expecting anything in return*:

The most important feature for our investigation lies in the lack of concern about any gift in return in the effusion of the gift in the realm of agape. This is a corollary to the absence of any reference to the idea of equivalence for agape.<sup>25</sup>

Ricœur thus connects the concept of agape with that of the *gift*. In fact, he seems to use these two concepts almost interchangeably. For example, he writes:

[Agape] has only one desire – to give – which is the expression of its generosity. Therefore, it appears as a surprise in the everyday world, where a gift takes on the social form of an exchange, and where the spirit of justice is expressed, as it is throughout its realm, by the rule of equivalence.<sup>26</sup>

These statements show that Ricœur has a rather specific concept of the gift. He thus takes “the lack of concern about any gift in return”<sup>27</sup> to be the defining feature of the gift and emphasizes repeatedly that “the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its ‘pure’ form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return.”<sup>28</sup> Ricœur also claims that agape and the gift lead to the “actual experience of (...) states of peace.”<sup>29</sup> These states of peace play an essential role in Ricœur’s theory of recognition. For, according to him, “the certitude that accompanies states of peace offers (...) a confirmation that the moral motivation for struggles for recognition is not illusory.”<sup>30</sup> Ricœur’s point seems to be that agape and the gift give us the certitude that we are “truly recognized,”<sup>31</sup> as he also puts it. For when we are loved and given gifts without being expected to give anything in return, we presumably come to find that true recognition is not an illusion but a reality.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>25</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>26</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>27</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>28</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219. – In my discussion of the concepts of agape and the gift, I have, again, focused on *The Course of Recognition*. However, both concepts play an important role in the work of Ricœur well before *The Course of Recognition* (see, e.g., Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 25; Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 325–6.

<sup>29</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

<sup>30</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

<sup>31</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 217.

<sup>32</sup> This claim makes it seem as though kinds of recognition that, according to Ricœur, are *not* states of peace, such as, e.g., justice (see, e.g., Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 220–5), do *not* give us the certitude that we are truly recognized. And this in turn makes it seem as though Ricœur takes these

## The Gift and the Struggle

This outline of Ricœur's theory of recognition allows us to give a first explanation of his sense of unease over the concept of the struggle for recognition. If recognition is conceived in terms of the gift, and if the gift is conceived as something that is given out of an "overflowing heart"<sup>33</sup> and out of "superabundance,"<sup>34</sup> etc., then the concept of the struggle for recognition indeed seems to become troubling and to create a sense of unease. For the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, *simply does not seem to be the kind of thing that can be struggled for*. There seems to be a fundamental tension between the concept of the struggle and the concept of the gift.

This fundamental tension is obvious if the struggle is conceived in terms of violence and force. For the gift obviously cannot be forced. A thing that is given because of the use of force is not a gift. However, even if the struggle is not conceived in terms of violence and force but in a broader sense, there still seems to be a tension between the concept of the struggle and the concept of the gift, as conceived by Ricœur. And this tension can, I think, be explained in the following way: As we have seen, according to Ricœur, "the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its 'pure' form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return."<sup>35</sup> The gift is thus not given with any requirement or expectation of the giver toward the receiver. However, it also seems that the gift is not given because of any requirement or expectation on the part of *the receiver toward the giver*. The gift therefore does not seem to be given because the receiver requires or expects the giver to give them the gift.

Ricœur explicitly makes this point with regard to the gift in return, which we will discuss in more detail below. He emphasizes that "the one who receives a gift can turn into a person who feels overwhelmed by the obligation to give something in return."<sup>36</sup> Ricœur even goes so far as to claim that the gift in return "destroy[s] the original gift as a gift" if the gift in return is given out of a feeling of obligation:

How is the recipient of the gift obliged to give back? If he is obliged to give a gift in return if he is generous, how then can the original gift have been generous? In other words, in recognizing a present by giving one in return, does one not destroy the original gift as a gift? If the first gesture in giving is one of generosity, the second, given under the obligation to make some return, annuls the gratuitous nature of the original gift. The systematic theoretician sees this circle, which is (...) a vicious circle, as a double bind.<sup>37</sup>

Ricœur thus claims that the gift in return must not be given out of a feeling of obligation. And in view of the proximity between the concept of obligation and the concepts of requirement

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states to be somewhat deficient exemplifications of recognition. One may even ask whether kinds of recognition that are not states of peace can count as true recognition at all. In any case, agape and the gift seem to have a privileged status in Ricœur's theory of recognition. He seems to take them to be the most complete exemplifications of recognition.

<sup>33</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>34</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>35</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>36</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 240.

<sup>37</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 229.

and expectation, it seems safe to say that the gift in return must not be given because the giver feels required or expected to give either. For just as a feeling of obligation on the part of the giver of the gift in return, according to Ricœur, “destroy[s] the original gift as a gift,” so does a feeling of being required or expected to give.

Now, these claims, I believe, can be extended to the first gift. The first gift, thus, also seems to be incompatible with a feeling of obligation and of being required or expected to give on the part of the giver. For, as we have seen, the first gift is characterized by Ricœur in terms of an “overflowing heart”<sup>38</sup> and of “superabundance.”<sup>39</sup> And these characterizations seem to rule out a feeling of obligation and of being required or expected to give on the part of the giver of the first gift. Also, the first gift, according to Ricœur, is given because agape “has only one desire – to give.”<sup>40</sup> The desire to give, thus, seems to come before any feeling of obligation and of being required or expected to give. Indeed, agape seems to leave no room for such feelings.

These claims then lead us to the concept of the struggle. For this concept seems to be closely related to the concepts of obligation, requirement, expectation, etc. Struggling for something thus often entails creating a feeling of obligation in others. And it typically entails making requirements, having expectations, etc. Yet, in view of this proximity between the concept of the struggle and the concepts of obligation, requirement, expectation, etc., it seems as though just as the first gift is undermined by a feeling of obligation – of being required or expected to give, etc. – on the part of the giver, so too the first gift is called into question by the fact that the receiver struggles for it. For, again, Ricœur’s claim that the first gift is given out of an “overflowing heart”<sup>41</sup> and out of “superabundance”<sup>42</sup> seems to speak against the idea that the first gift is given because of any kind of struggle of the receiver. And his claim that the first gift comes from agape, which “has only one desire – to give,”<sup>43</sup> indeed seems to make any kind of struggle superfluous.

In the end, the tension between Ricœur’s concept of the gift and the concept of the struggle seems to be most evident in his characterization of the gift as “a surprise in the everyday world.”<sup>44</sup> For this characterization also seems to apply to the receiver. The receiver thus also seems to be surprised by the gift. And since any kind of struggle takes away this element of surprise, any kind of struggle seems to be a threat to the gift. Receiving, we may say, comes before asking in the case of the gift.

Summing up, I believe that Ricœur’s sense of unease over the concept of the struggle for recognition should not be explained by the threat of “a kind of ‘bad infinity,’” “a new form of the ‘unhappy consciousness,’”<sup>45</sup> etc. Instead, it should be explained by drawing out the implications of Ricœur’s concept of the gift. For once recognition is conceived in terms of the gift, and once the gift

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<sup>38</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>39</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>40</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>41</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>42</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>43</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>44</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>45</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

is conceived in Ricœur's way, that is, as something that is given out of an "overflowing heart"<sup>46</sup> and out of "superabundance,"<sup>47</sup> etc., Ricœur's sense of unease with regard to the concept of the struggle for recognition seems to follow quite naturally. The gift simply does not seem to be the kind of thing that can be struggled for. It seems to elude the struggle.

This explanation of Ricœur's sense of unease regarding the concept of the struggle for recognition, however, raises a more fundamental question, namely: Why should recognition be conceived in terms of the gift in the first place? What are the actual arguments for this position? As we have seen above, Ricœur seems to base his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift on the assumption that "our actual experience of states of peace"<sup>48</sup> gives us the certitude that we are "truly recognized."<sup>49</sup> Ricœur's analysis thus seems to be based on a *phenomenology of states of peace*.

However, Ricœur does not seem to give *theoretical* arguments for why recognition should be conceived in terms of the gift. And this lack of theoretical arguments, in my view, creates a tension in Ricœur's theory of recognition. For it makes it seem as though his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift comes almost out of nowhere and does not stand on a particularly solid foundation. Ricœur's analysis may even seem like a *deus ex machina*, the wishful thinking of a philosopher who does not want to face the facts of a world in which struggle seems to be ubiquitous.

I do believe, however, that Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift can be given a more solid foundation, that there are theoretical arguments that can be offered for this position. More specifically, I believe that Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift can be developed from the tensions in the concept of the struggle for recognition. These tensions, I will argue, lead us toward Ricœur's position.

## The Lord-Bondsman Dialectic

To make my case, I will draw on Hegel's classical passages on the lord-bondsman or master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This may come as a surprise. For Honneth, in *The Struggle for Recognition*, explicitly neglects the *Phenomenology* and focuses on Hegel's earlier Jena fragments instead. And this focus has strongly influenced the contemporary debate on recognition. Indeed, Honneth's influence is evident in Ricœur's discussion of Hegel in *The Course of Recognition*. Ricœur thus writes:

Why must we, like other scholars with whom I associate myself, go back to the fragments from the Jena period rather than build on the work of Alexandre Kojève, the author of the well-known *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*? These are works that take the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as their primary reference and thus give the struggle between master and slave the position we all recognize. My wager was that by confronting the theme of recognition at its inchoative stage, the reader might hope to see resources of meaning disclosed that were not exhausted in Hegel's later, more accomplished books (...) where the theme of recognition

<sup>46</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>47</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>48</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218.

<sup>49</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 217.

and of being recognized has lost not only its density of presence but its subversive virulence.<sup>50</sup>

Thus, just like Honneth, Ricœur explicitly neglects the *Phenomenology* and the lord-bondsman dialectic and focuses instead on Hegel's earlier Jena fragments.

In view of Williams' claim that the lord-bondsman dialectic in the *Phenomenology* is Hegel's "most explicit analysis of the concept [of recognition]"<sup>51</sup> and Ikäheimo's claim that "the most widely read of all Hegel's texts discussing recognition is still the chapter on 'Self-consciousness' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* where Hegel illustrates his thoughts on the theme with the famous figures of the 'master and bondsman,'"<sup>52</sup> however, it must be asked why the *Phenomenology* and the lord-bondsman dialectic play such a minor role in Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition* and, subsequently, in the contemporary debate on recognition, including Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift.

The reason for this absence seems to be Honneth's profound skepticism about the theoretical framework of the *Phenomenology*. Honneth thus claims that Hegel subjugates "his thought to the monological premises of the philosophy of consciousness"<sup>53</sup> in the *Phenomenology*, so that "ethical life [becomes] (...) a form of monologically self-developing Spirit and no longer constitutes a particularly demanding form of intersubjectivity."<sup>54</sup>

I cannot discuss the adequacy of Honneth's interpretation of the *Phenomenology*. However, I do want to point out that even if this interpretation is accepted, the use of certain ideas in the *Phenomenology* still seems to be justified. This use does not seem to commit us to the supposedly monological premises of the *Phenomenology*. And it does not seem to make any more "demanding form of intersubjectivity" impossible.

Moreover, it should be noted that Honneth later changed his mind about the *Phenomenology* and the mature Hegel in general. Thus, in the preface to *The I in We*, he writes:

Whereas in *The Struggle for Recognition* I had still assumed that only Hegel's Jena lectures contained coherent elements of a theory of recognition, after more intensive study of his mature writings I came to realize how wrong I had been. I no longer believe that Hegel sacrificed his initial intersubjectivism in the course of developing a monological concept of

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<sup>50</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 173–4.

<sup>51</sup> Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 48.

<sup>52</sup> Heikki Ikäheimo, *Recognition and the Human Life-Form: Beyond Identity and Difference* (New York: Routledge), 65.

<sup>53</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 36; see also 48, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 61. – Habermas similarly accuses Hegel of embracing "the framework of monological self-consciousness" (Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 40), but exempts the Jena *Realphilosophie*, "in which the young Hegel's approach via a theory of intersubjectivity left its traces" (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 390), from this accusation (see also Jürgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973)).

spirit; rather, Hegel sought throughout his life to interpret objective spirit, i.e. social reality, as a set of layered relations of recognition.<sup>55</sup>

In view of this, I feel that the use of the lord-bondsman dialectic in the contemporary debate on recognition, although it may be surprising at first, is justified. Honneth's early skepticism about the *Phenomenology* need not prevent us from drawing on this source.

Now, my discussion of the lord-bondsman dialectic does not in any way claim to be exhaustive, to properly situate the text within Hegel's overall system, to do justice to the text's ambiguities, etc. Instead, I will give a highly simplified account of the lord-bondsman dialectic and focus on the points that I take to be most relevant with regard to Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift.<sup>56</sup>

The first point I want to make is that the struggle for recognition, which is the driving force behind the lord-bondsman dialectic, initially is a *violent* struggle: Both parties involved use violence in order to make the other side recognize them. And since neither party initially is willing to give the recognition the other side wants, the struggle for recognition becomes more and more violent and eventually turns into a "life-and-death struggle."<sup>57</sup> If, however, one party is killed by the other, recognition becomes impossible because there is no one left to recognize the survivor. Thus, in order for the struggle for recognition to reach its next phase, one party must submit to the other and give them the recognition they want.

As a result of this submission of one party, the struggle for recognition comes to a temporary end. For there are no longer two parties struggling for recognition. Instead, there is one party that is recognized by the other and, thus, no longer has to struggle, and one party that has given up their struggle for recognition and accepted domination. As Hegel puts it: "The former is lord, the other is bondsman."<sup>58</sup>

However, the lord's domination of the bondsman soon turns out to be a Pyrrhic victory. For the lord and the bondsman are "unequal and opposed."<sup>59</sup> And this inequality and opposition also affects the recognition the lord gets from the bondsman. For the lord is recognized by someone they do not recognize in turn. As Hegel puts it: "The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), vii–viii.

<sup>56</sup> For detailed discussions of the lord-bondsman dialectic, see, e.g., Scott Jenkins, "Self-Consciousness in the Phenomenology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel*, ed. Dean Moyar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Frederick Neuhouser, "Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Terry P. Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>57</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114.

<sup>58</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 115.

<sup>59</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 115.

<sup>60</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 116.

This one-sidedness of the lord's recognition by the bondsman is generally taken to be the main problem in the lord-bondsman dialectic. Kojève, in his highly influential interpretation of Hegel, which Ricœur mentions above, puts this problem in the following way:

The relation between Master and Slave (...) is not recognition properly so-called. To see this, let us analyze the relation from the Master's point of view. The Master is not the only one to consider himself Master. The Slave, also, considers him as such. Hence, he is recognized in his human reality and dignity. But this recognition is one-sided, for he does not recognize in turn the Slave's human reality and dignity. Hence, he is recognized by someone whom he does not recognize. And this is what is insufficient – what is tragic – in his situation. The Master has fought and risked his life for a recognition without value for him. For he can be satisfied only by recognition from one whom he recognizes as worthy of recognizing him. The Master's attitude, therefore, is an existential impasse.<sup>61</sup>

Kojève thus claims that the master's recognition by the slave is not a proper recognition. For this recognition, due to its one-sidedness, does not have any value for the master and cannot satisfy him. And as a result, despite his victory in the struggle for recognition, the master is at an impasse.

Now, the solution to the problem of the one-sidedness of the master's recognition by the slave seems to be obvious: This one-sided recognition must be overcome and replaced by a reciprocal recognition in which each party both recognizes and is recognized by the other. The parties thus have to move from one-sidedness to reciprocity.

## Kojève on the Necessity of Violence

This way of putting both the problem and the solution does not rule out the use of *more violence* in order to achieve the goal of reciprocal recognition. This can, again, be seen in Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. For, according to Kojève, it is the slave who, by resorting to violence in order to free himself from the master, forces the master to give him the recognition the slave wants. Reciprocal recognition is therefore brought about by the slave's use of more violence. As Kojève puts it:

The Master, unable to recognize the Other who recognizes him, finds himself in an impasse. The Slave, on the other hand, recognizes the Other (the Master) from the beginning. In order that mutual and reciprocal recognition, which alone can fully and definitively realize and satisfy man, be established, it suffices for the Slave to impose himself on the Master and be recognized by him. To be sure, for this to take place, the slave must cease to be slave: he must transcend himself, "overcome" himself, as Slave.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 19.

<sup>62</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 21.

The slave thus imposes himself on the master and forces the master's recognition. And in doing so, the slave both overcomes being a slave and leads the master out of the impasse of being a master.

Kojève even goes so far as to call the use of more violence by the slave *metaphysically necessary*:

In fact, what made Man a Slave was his refusal to risk his life. Hence he will not cease to be a Slave, as long as he is not ready to risk his life in a *Fight* against the Master, as long as he does not accept the idea of his *death*. A liberation without a bloody Fight, therefore, is metaphysically impossible.<sup>63</sup>

This view, however, seems problematic for several reasons. Kojève's claim that violence is metaphysically necessary for liberation does not just raise the same ethical questions as any justification of violence, insofar as the use of violence may be said to treat persons as means rather than ends, to run the risk of escalation and a cycle of violence, etc.<sup>64</sup> More important in the present context is that a reciprocal recognition between master and slave that is brought about by the slave's use of more violence seems to face a very similar problem to that of the master's one-sided recognition by the slave that it seeks to overcome. Again, the question arises as to whether the recognition in question is a "recognition properly so-called"<sup>65</sup> that is valuable and satisfying for the person who is recognized. For a reciprocal recognition that is brought about by the use of violence seems to be just as problematic as a one-sided recognition that is brought about in this way.

Kojève's solution to the problem of the one-sidedness of the master's recognition by the slave thus ultimately raises the question of the relation between recognition and violence. In view of this solution, we must ask whether any recognition that is brought about by the use of violence is a proper recognition that is valuable and satisfying for the person who is recognized.

## Recognition and the Other's Freedom

The question of the relation between recognition and violence, or, more generally, coercion, is discussed in particular by Williams. According to him, the conclusion to be drawn from the lord-bondsman dialectic is not just that one-sided recognition must be replaced and overcome by reciprocal recognition. Instead, Williams claims that the lord-bondsman dialectic leads to the conclusion that "coercion and mastery must be given up."<sup>66</sup> As he also puts it: "The recognition that is needed cannot be coerced or controlled. Mutual-reciprocal recognition is possible only if

<sup>63</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 56.

<sup>64</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Fiala, *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>65</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, 56. – Similar claims are made, e.g., by Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 189; J. M. Bernstein, "From Self-Consciousness to Community: Act and Recognition in the Master-Slave Relationship," in *The State and Civil Society: Studies in Hegel's Political Philosophy*, ed. Z. A. Pelczynski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15; Ludwig Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes* (Freiburg: Alber, 1979), 71.

coercion is renounced.”<sup>67</sup> Proper recognition, according to Williams, presupposes a renunciation of coercion, mastery, and control.

Williams then goes on to characterize reciprocal recognition as a process in which

the self releases the other and allows the other to go free. This mutual releasement, or “letting be,” connotes not indifference but allowing the other to be and granting the other freedom. “Letting be” means to renounce domination, to renounce seizing on the other’s possibilities and freedom.<sup>68</sup>

Williams thus connects the concept of recognition with the concept of *the other’s freedom*. The solution to the problem of the one-sidedness of the lord’s recognition by the bondsman, in his view, does not just consist in bringing about reciprocity but in bringing about *mutual releasement*, that is, in granting the other freedom, in allowing the other to go free. Williams sums up his view as follows:

Recognition is both needed and yet cannot be coerced. If it is coerced, the resulting recognition is phony and inauthentic, as Hegel’s analysis of mastery shows. Affirmative self-recognition in the other cannot be coerced; it must be freely proffered by the other, who in turn must be allowed to be.<sup>69</sup>

If, however, Williams’ interpretation of the lord-bondsman dialectic is correct, and the main problem in this dialectic is not just the lack of reciprocity but the fact that the lord has taken away the bondsman’s freedom, then Kojève’s solution to this problem obviously turns out to be a nonstarter. For this solution consists in leaving the lord no other choice but to recognize the bondsman. The bondsman thus takes away the lord’s freedom. As a result, the bondsman’s recognition by the lord after their liberation, from Williams’ viewpoint, is just as “phony and inauthentic” as the lord’s recognition by the bondsman before their liberation.

## The Other’s Freedom and the Gift

Williams’ emphasis on the other’s freedom raises the question of how we can relate to the other without taking away their freedom and calling into question the value of their recognition. Thus, as we have just seen, violence and coercion seem to be incompatible with the other’s freedom. As a result, violence and coercion seem to devalue the other’s recognition. However, non-coercive kinds of relating to the other presumably also can be a problem. Lies and manipulation, for example, also seem to call into question the other’s freedom. As such, lies and manipulation seem to threaten the value of the other’s recognition. And even kinds of persuasion that do not cross the threshold into lies and manipulation may be seen as a problem. For these kinds of persuasion may be seen as attempts to guide the other in a certain direction that are in tension with the other’s freedom.

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<sup>67</sup> Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, 56.

<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, 59.

Now, Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift, in my view, can be seen as a continuation, and indeed as a *radicalization*, of this line of thinking. This analysis also seems to rule out the use of violence, coercion, lies, manipulation, etc. For a thing given because of violence, coercion, lies, manipulation, etc., does not seem to be a gift. Yet Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift goes even further. For, as we have also seen, the gift as conceived by Ricœur is not given because of a requirement, an expectation, an obligation, etc. Indeed, the gift is not even asked for but comes as a surprise.

These claims make it seem as though Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift calls into question *any* attempt to get the other's recognition. *Any* attempt to get the other to recognize oneself seems to become a problem in view of this analysis. For the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, simply does not seem to be the kind of thing that we can make happen, whether through violence, coercion, lies, manipulation, etc., or through any kind of persuasion. Instead, the gift seems in principle to elude us.

Above we asked why recognition should be conceived in terms of the gift. And we saw that Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift does not seem to be based on theoretical arguments but rather on a phenomenology of states of peace. Now, after our discussion of Hegel's master-slave dialectic and Williams' interpretation thereof, we are in a position to provide a theoretical foundation for Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift. In my view, this analysis should be seen as coming from a profound concern for the other's freedom. This concern is initiated by the realization that the other's recognition cannot be forced. And it makes an increasing number of attempts to get the other to recognize oneself seem questionable. Eventually, even seemingly innocuous efforts to win the other's approval create a sense of unease in the person making the efforts. Ultimately, any kind of struggle for recognition is abandoned and an attitude of radical releasement is adopted, in which the other's recognition is seen as a gift.<sup>70</sup>

Williams claims that Ricœur's theory of recognition is basically a repetition of what Hegel already said two centuries ago and that it does not provide any particularly new ideas. Williams

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<sup>70</sup> This argument raises the question of whether Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift delegitimizes the struggle for recognition. Does it take away its justification? Clearly, Ricœur does not think so. Instead, he believes that the struggle for recognition will go on, and with justification. The states of peace that Ricœur advocates, thus, are mere "clearings," as he also puts it (Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 218), islands in a sea of struggle. And the recognition that they give cannot replace the recognition that is brought about by the struggle, nor is it supposed to. However, Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift does have the implication that there are limits to what can be achieved through the struggle. These limits are particularly evident in the connection that Ricœur draws between the concept of recognition and the concept of agape. Thus, while the struggle seems to be an adequate means of achieving social justice, the undeserved and unexpected character of agape makes the struggle seem inadequate for achieving it. Indeed, agape, according to Ricœur, is not an achievement at all, but a gift. And in view of the importance that he attaches to it, the incompatibility between the concept of agape and the concept of the struggle does seem to relativize the scope and significance of the struggle. Ultimately, Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift, in my view, suggests that the only recognition that, to put it in Hegelian terms, can truly satisfy our desire is, paradoxically, a recognition that we did not ask for or see coming. – I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the question of the legitimacy of the struggle in Ricœur's theory of recognition.

thus writes that “Ricœur’s proposed resolution to the paradoxes of the gift approximates Hegelian reciprocal recognition.”<sup>71</sup> He continues:

Ricœur, who in an earlier book [in chapter 9 of the third volume of *Time and Narrative*<sup>72</sup>] had responded affirmatively to the question, ‘Should we abandon Hegel?’, here [in *The Course of Recognition*] defends not only the concept of recognition, but also a version of mutual recognition very close to Hegel’s (although not explicitly acknowledged as such).<sup>73</sup>

And Williams concludes: “Having previously been renounced and mourned by Ricœur, Hegel must be smiling, waiting for him at the end of the course of recognition.”<sup>74</sup>

While I cannot discuss the adequacy of Williams’ interpretation of Hegel, I do believe that there are important differences between this interpretation and Ricœur’s analysis of recognition in terms of the gift. Williams thus proposes an ideal of an “enlarged self-identity result[ing] from a joint reciprocal action [between self and other] that is not completely under the control of the self.”<sup>75</sup> This ideal seems to imply that, while the other’s recognition cannot be controlled *completely*, it can be controlled *to some extent*. Williams also defines the “renunciation of seizing upon the other” as “granting the other freedom to recognize, or to withhold recognition.”<sup>76</sup> This definition seems to suggest that he does not take the renunciation of seizing upon the other to amount to an abandonment of any kind of struggle for recognition. In the end, Williams writes: “*Anerkennung* involves a search for satisfaction in the *uncoerced* recognition of the other.”<sup>77</sup> Williams thus does not seem to see a problem with this search, as long as it is not coercive.

All of this, in my view, clearly distinguishes Williams’ interpretation of Hegel from Ricœur’s analysis of recognition in terms of the gift. For while this analysis calls into question the very idea of the struggle for recognition, Williams’ interpretation of Hegel seems to take this idea for granted. In view of this, I believe that Ricœur’s analysis of recognition in terms of the gift goes beyond Williams’ interpretation of Hegel and that it provides a new perspective.

## Going beyond Reciprocity?

Ricœur’s analysis of recognition in terms of the gift also raises new questions. For this analysis makes it seem as though the movement of recognition is a movement from one-sidedness

<sup>71</sup> Robert R. Williams, “Ricœur on Recognition,” *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, n° 3 (2008), 467, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2008.00315.x>.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative: Volume 3* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

<sup>73</sup> Williams, “Ricœur on Recognition,” 469.

<sup>74</sup> Williams, “Ricœur on Recognition,” 473. – For further discussions of the relation between Ricœur and Hegel, see Timo Helenius, *Ricœur, Culture, and Recognition: A Hermeneutic of Cultural Subjectivity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), chap. 6; Ludwig Siep, “Der lange Weg zur Anerkennung,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 55, n° 6 (2007), 981–1000, <https://doi.org/10.1524/dzph.2007.55.6.981>.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, 57.

<sup>76</sup> Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 155.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, *Recognition*, 155.

to reciprocity to one-sidedness again. At the beginning, thus, there is the one-sidedness of domination in which the lord takes away the bondsman's freedom and turns them into their tool. This one-sidedness, then, is overcome and replaced by a reciprocal relation in which the bondsman takes back their freedom and is no longer just acted upon by the lord but also acts upon them.

Ricœur's analysis of recognition in terms of the gift, however, seems to go beyond even this reciprocal relation. For as we have seen, the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, neither seems to respond to a requirement, an expectation, etc., nor to require or expect anything in return. This creates the impression that the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, is a thoroughly one-sided phenomenon.

The question of one-sidedness versus reciprocity is at the center of the philosophical debate on the gift. Marcel Hénaff, in *The Philosophers' Gift*, criticizes philosophers' infatuation with the supposed one-sidedness of the gift. The general tenor of his critique comes out quite clearly in the following quotation from Rousseau that Hénaff puts at the beginning of his book: "It is not the philosophers who know men best. They see them only through the prejudices of philosophy, and I know of no station where one has so many."<sup>78</sup> Following this quotation, Hénaff writes: "When it comes to the gift, philosophers love to be the most generous."<sup>79</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Ricœur is one of the "generous" philosophers who are criticized by Hénaff, who claims that "reciprocity and *agapē* appear (...) mutually exclusive."<sup>80</sup> Indeed, Ricœur seems to concede that the concept of *agape* creates the impression of one-sidedness. Thus, in a passage whose last part we have quoted repeatedly above, he writes: "[*Agape*] seems to refute in advance the idea of mutual recognition, inasmuch as the generous practice of gift giving, at least in its 'pure' form, neither requires nor expects a gift in return."<sup>81</sup> Ricœur then goes on to speak of "the unilateralness of *agape*" as well as of "the unilateral character of the generosity belonging to *agape*."<sup>82</sup> And in view of the close connection that Ricœur draws between the concept of *agape* and that of the gift, these statements seem to amount to the concession that his theory of the gift makes it seem as though the gift is a one-sided phenomenon.

Yet, at the same time, Ricœur explicitly introduces his theory of recognition as a theory of reciprocal or, as he prefers to call it, *mutual* recognition. The chapter in which he develops his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift is entitled "Mutual Recognition." And at the beginning of this analysis, Ricœur writes:

The thesis I want to argue for can be summed up as follows: The alternative to the idea of struggle in the process of mutual recognition is to be sought in peaceful experiences of mutual recognition, based on symbolic mediations as exempt from the juridical as from the commercial order of exchange.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 243.

<sup>79</sup> Marcel Hénaff, *The Philosophers' Gift: Reexamining Reciprocity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Hénaff, *The Philosophers' Gift*, 143.

<sup>81</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>82</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>83</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

Ricœur therefore does not believe that his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift actually “refute[s] (...) the idea of mutual recognition.”<sup>84</sup> Although he concedes this impression, he ultimately takes it to be false. Ricœur then attempts to show that mutual recognition is not actually refuted by his analysis of recognition as gift by developing his novel account of the *gift in return*.

Thus, as we have seen above, Ricœur takes the gift in return as posing a significant challenge to his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift. He even goes so far as to say that the gift in return “destroy[s] the original gift as a gift”<sup>85</sup> if it is given out of a feeling of obligation. As Ricœur also puts it above: “If the first gesture in giving is one of generosity, the second, given under the obligation to make some return, annuls the gratuitous nature of the original gift.”<sup>86</sup>

Now, the claim that a feeling of obligation on the part of the receiver of the first gift “destroy[s]” or “annuls” the first gift may seem overly strong. For the receiver simply seems to *misunderstand* the intention of the giver of the first gift, falsely assuming that the giver requires or expects a gift in return. However, such misunderstandings about the agent’s intentions typically do not seem to affect the value of the agent’s action if the agent cannot be blamed for these misunderstandings. And it does not seem as though the giver of the first gift is blameworthy for the receiver’s feeling of obligation if the giver has not done anything to suggest that they require or expect a gift in return.

Within the French debate on the gift, however, the suspicion about the gift in return that comes out in Ricœur’s theory of the gift is quite common.<sup>87</sup> Derrida famously claims not just that the gift “is annulled each time there is restitution or countergift”<sup>88</sup> but also that merely *recognizing* the gift as gift is enough to annul it since any such recognition “gives back, in the place (...) of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent.”<sup>89</sup> Derrida thus ends up characterizing the gift as “the impossible.”<sup>90</sup> As he puts it: “For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift.”<sup>91</sup>

Now, Ricœur does not go as far as Derrida. He does not take the gift to be impossible. However, Ricœur does believe that any theory of the gift must include an account of the gift in return that ensures that the gift in return does not become an obligation, a restitution, etc. Without such an account, he contends, the gift is constantly in danger of being destroyed or annulled. The key to an account of the gift in return that takes away this danger, in Ricœur’s view, is the concept of *gratitude*. As he puts it:

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<sup>84</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>85</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 229.

<sup>86</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 229.

<sup>87</sup> For an overview, see Hénaff, *The Philosophers’ Gift*.

<sup>88</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, *Given Time*, 16.

Gratitude lightens the weight of obligation to give in return and reorients this toward a generosity equal to the one that led to the first gift. (...) A *good receiving* depends on gratitude, which is the soul of the division between good and bad reciprocity.<sup>92</sup>

Ricœur's point seems to be that the first gift does not have to create a feeling of obligation in the receiver. Instead, it can also create a feeling of gratitude. And this feeling of gratitude, according to Ricœur, is "equal" to the generosity out of which the first gift is given in that it also seems to be a manifestation of "the overflowing heart"<sup>93</sup> and the "superabundance"<sup>94</sup> that brings about the first gift. Put differently, the overflowing of one heart can make the other heart overflow as well. And this mutual overflowing of hearts out of superabundance, according to Ricœur, is what constitutes good reciprocity.

Ricœur believes that this account of the gift in return allows him to conceive of gift giving as mutual without subjecting it to "the rule of equivalence"<sup>95</sup> and turning it into a calculation, an exchange, etc. It must be emphasized, however, that the role mutuality or reciprocity plays in Ricœur's theory of recognition seems to be fundamentally different from the role reciprocity usually plays in theories of recognition inspired by Hegel. For most of these theories seem to essentially share Kojève's assumption that reciprocity is *necessary* for recognition since a recognition that is not reciprocated does not have any value for the person receiving it. A "recognition properly so-called,"<sup>96</sup> thus, must be reciprocal.

The gift, by contrast, does not seem to be devalued by a lack of reciprocity. Indeed, in the case of the gift, the threat of devaluation seems to come from the opposite direction. As we have seen, for Ricœur, the gift in return "destroy[s] the original gift as a gift"<sup>97</sup> if it is given out of a feeling of obligation. The threat of devaluation therefore seems to come *from* reciprocity rather than a lack thereof in the case of the gift.

Moreover, Ricœur's attempt to remove the threat of devaluation by way of a novel account of the gift in return obviously does not lead to the conclusion that reciprocity is necessary for recognition. Instead, the conclusion seems to be that recognition is *compatible* with reciprocity. The gift in return therefore does not have to "destroy the original gift as a gift" since it can be given out of gratitude rather than a feeling of obligation.

Honneth seems to see this different take on the role that reciprocity plays as the main difference between his theory of recognition and that of Ricœur. He says:

The systematic point is that Ricœur believes that we should think of recognition first as a one-sided act of grace – something like the gift – whereas I think that this is what comes second. I would always put reciprocal forms of recognition first. This means that we should

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<sup>92</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 243.

<sup>93</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 221.

<sup>94</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 251.

<sup>95</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>96</sup> Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 19.

<sup>97</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 229.

understand recognition as something that is happening between subjects, not strictly from one subject to the other. So recognition is in itself a mutual, reciprocal interaction.<sup>98</sup>

Honneth thus seems to assume that Ricœur takes recognition to be something that is not “in itself” reciprocal. Instead, recognition “in itself,” according to Honneth’s interpretation of Ricœur, is “a one-sided act of grace.” And this assumption, again, seems to imply that Ricœur does not take recognition and reciprocity to be necessarily connected. Instead, Ricœur seems to think of recognition and reciprocity as merely compatible.

There is, however, one passage in particular in Ricœur’s theory of recognition that may be seen as evidence that he takes recognition and reciprocity to be related in a way that goes beyond mere compatibility. Ricœur writes: “Instead of the obligation to give in return, it would be better, under the sign of agape, to speak of a *response to a call* coming from the generosity of the first gift.”<sup>99</sup> Ricœur thus characterizes the relation between the gift and the gift in return in terms of call and response. And while the relation between the two obviously is not one of necessity, call and response do seem to be related in a way that goes beyond mere compatibility. For the goal of the call is to get the response. Call and response thus seem to stand in a *teleological* relation. And in view of this, it may seem as though Ricœur takes the gift and the gift in return to stand in a teleological relation as well. According to this interpretation, the first gift “neither requires nor expects a gift in return.”<sup>100</sup> However, the first gift does have the goal of getting a gift in return.

This teleological interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return is endorsed by Williams, who, in addition to his emphasis on the parallels between Ricœur and Hegel, also considers Ricœur’s position alongside that of Fichte. Williams writes:

The first gift, instead of laying on the recipient an obligation to give in return, is rather something like a **call** or **summons** coming from the generosity of the first. Thus Ricœur transforms the gift from an archaic form of commercial exchange, to something like the Fichtean *Aufforderung*, which summons and calls forth a corresponding recognition and mutuality. The gift – motivated by generosity that expects nothing in return and does not think in terms of equivalences – summons and calls for a response without necessitating it. Ricœur parallels Fichte in that he conceives recognition as a response to the gift as a summons to action. Recognition names the free and contingent response to the call.<sup>101</sup>

According to Williams, the first gift does not expect or necessitate but summons and calls for a gift in return. And this seems to imply that the first gift is given with the goal of getting a gift in return.<sup>102</sup>

However, while there is textual support for Williams’ teleological interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return, this interpretation also raises several questions, both

<sup>98</sup> Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory Today,” 217.

<sup>99</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 243, my emphasis.

<sup>100</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 219.

<sup>101</sup> Williams, “Ricœur on Recognition,” 471.

<sup>102</sup> Marcelo seems to see things similarly (see, e.g., Gonçalo Marcelo, “Paul Ricœur and the Utopia of Mutual Recognition,” *Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies*, vol. 2, n° 1 (2011), 119, 122, <https://doi.org/10.5195/errs.2011.69>).

from an exegetical as well as from a systematic viewpoint. To begin with, on the page before the quotation above, Ricœur characterizes the gift in return as “something like a response to the offer,”<sup>103</sup> rather than a response to the call. His use of the term “offer” in this quotation may be seen as evidence that Ricœur merely wants to show the compatibility of the gift and the gift in return. According to this compatibilist interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return, the first gift is given with an openness to the possibility of getting a gift in return but not with the goal of doing so. The first gift allows for but does not seek or aim at receiving a gift in return.

In addition, it is difficult to see how the first gift can summon and call the other to give a gift in return without in any way requiring, expecting, or obliging the other to do so. Williams seems to assume a clear-cut distinction between the concepts of summons and call on the one hand, and those of requirement, expectation, and obligation on the other. And this assumption seems to be at least in need of further justification.

In the end, Williams’ teleological interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return, in my view, runs the risk of losing what has been gained, namely the concept of a kind of relating to the other that “has only one desire – to give.”<sup>104</sup> For the giver, according to Williams, does not just have the desire to give but also has the desire to *receive*. The giver wants the receiver to give back. And even if this goal does not amount to a requirement, an expectation, or an obligation, it still seems to be in tension with the intuition that *the gift comes with no strings attached*.

As such, I believe that the compatibilist interpretation of the relation between the gift and the gift in return is to be preferred to Williams’ teleological interpretation. The gift is thus *not* one-sided in the sense that it rules out and is “destroy[ed]” or “annul[led]”<sup>105</sup> by the gift in return. However, the gift *is* one-sided in the sense that it neither needs nor seeks a gift in return. Of course, the giver of the first gift will be happy if they receive a gift in return. However, this should not in any way be part of their motivation. For if it is, the emergence of some kind of expectation in the giver and of some kind of feeling of obligation in the receiver seems almost inevitable.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show that Ricœur’s theory of recognition opens up a new perspective in the contemporary debate on recognition. It calls into question presuppositions that have been taken for granted and brings to light tensions that have been overlooked. Ricœur’s “sense of unease (...) with regard to the claims attaching to the very idea of a struggle”<sup>106</sup> highlights a blind spot in the contemporary debate on recognition. And his analysis of recognition in terms of the gift provides a new answer to the question of what it means to be “truly recognized.”<sup>107</sup>

More specifically, I have tried to show that the gift, as conceived by Ricœur, cannot be struggled for. The gift eludes the struggle. For any kind of struggle takes away its element of surprise and turns it into something other than a gift. The details of this tension between the

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<sup>103</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 242, my emphasis.

<sup>104</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 224.

<sup>105</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 229.

<sup>106</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 217.

<sup>107</sup> Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 217.

concept of the struggle and the concept of the gift have been neglected in my previous work on the issue<sup>108</sup> and further underline the novelty of Ricœur's approach.

Ricœur tends to emphasize the continuity between his theory and the main contemporary theories of recognition. What I have tried to show, however, is that Ricœur's theory is grounded on fundamentally different premises and leads to fundamentally different conclusions. This is particularly evident in my discussion of the relation between Ricœur and Williams. Thus, as I have tried to show, Williams' theory of recognition does not go nearly as far as that of Ricœur, despite sharing some of the same intuitions. For while Ricœur emphasizes the elusiveness of the other's recognition in a way that ultimately places it beyond our reach, Williams does not seem to see a problem with the concept of the struggle for recognition, as long as the struggle does not involve force. Also, Williams' interpretation of the role that reciprocity plays in Ricœur's theory of recognition fails to account for the ways in which Ricœur challenges and goes beyond what seems to be the majority view on the relation between recognition and reciprocity in the contemporary debate, according to which a recognition that is not reciprocated is ultimately incomplete. By pointing out these differences between Ricœur and Williams, I believe that I have filled some of the gaps left by my previous work on the issue<sup>109</sup> and further highlighted the importance of Ricœur's theory of recognition. Indeed, I think that this theory has the potential to fundamentally shift the contemporary debate on recognition. I hope to have at least begun to demonstrate that potential here.

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<sup>108</sup> Wehinger, "Anerkennung als Gabe."

<sup>109</sup> Wehinger, "Anerkennung als Gabe."

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