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The Excellence Award at the Fonds Ricœur's Summer Workshop 2025 – "The Dialectic between Recognition and Compromise: A Foundation for Contemporary Political Ethics?"

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Abstract

This article aims to show that P. Ricœur's thought offers a robust theoretical framework for conceptualizing the dialectic between recognition and compromise, serving as foundation for a political ethics suited to the challenges of pluralism in contemporary societies. Compromise serves to mitigate conflicts arising from demands for recognition and to provide practical avenues for solving such disputes, while the imperative of recognition prevents compromise from degenerating into a mere strategic negotiation and enriches the practical imagination necessary for collective action. A Ricœurian approach to politics enables to sketch out a political ethics grounded both on a "will-to-live-together" and "just institutions," one that acknowledges the inevitability of conflict but sustains the possibility of shared political existence.

Keywords: *Paul Ricœur, recognition, compromise, democracy, political ethics.*

Résumé

Cet article vise à démontrer que la pensée de P. Ricœur fournit un cadre théorique précieux pour conceptualiser la dialectique entre reconnaissance et compromis comme fondement d'une éthique politique adaptée aux défis du pluralisme dans les sociétés contemporaines. Le compromis peut apaiser les conflits soulevés par les demandes de reconnaissance et fournir des pistes pratiques pour traiter ces différends, tandis que l'impératif de reconnaissance empêche le compromis de dégénérer en simple négociation stratégique et enrichit l'imagination pratique par l'action collective. Une approche ricœurienne de la politique permet d'esquisser une éthique politique fondée sur un "vouloir-vivre-ensemble" et des "institutions justes", qui reconnaît l'inévitabilité du conflit mais maintient la possibilité d'une existence politique commune.

Mots-clés *: Paul Ricœur, reconnaissance, compromis, démocratie, éthique politique.*

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The paper that won the Excellence Award at the 2025 edition of the Fonds Ricœur's Summer Workshop is published below. Since 2017, the Fonds Ricœur's Summer Workshops, which take place in Paris during the month of June, have been co-organized by the Fonds Ricœur and the Society for Ricœur Studies. Each year the workshop is dedicated to a specific work by Paul Ricœur on which the presentations and discussions are based.

In 2019, the Fondation Goélands[1] launched an Excellence Award which is given annually to the best paper presented at the Summer Workshop. The winner receives 1000 Euros and, within six months of the Summer Workshop, his or her paper is published in the "Varia" section of the journal *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies.*

All *doctoral* or *post-doctoral* researchers selected to present a paper at a particular Summer Workshop and who wish to apply are eligible for this prize. The paper can be presented in either French or English and its length must correspond to the 20-25 minutes allowed for the oral presentation at the Summer Workshop.

The Jury's criteria of evaluation for the Summer Workshops' Excellence Award are as follows:

1. As the Fonds Ricœur's Summer Workshop focuses each year on a specific work by Paul Ricœur, the Jury favours contributions that place this work at the centre of their reflection.

2. The Jury then assesses the scientific quality of the papers in terms of their precision, their argumentative rigour, and their mastery of the secondary literature on the subject.

3. Lastly, the Jury particularly values the originality of the contributions, that is, their specific contribution to Ricœurian research and the novelty of the theses put forward.

In 2025, the 8th edition of the Fonds Ricœur's Summer Workshop was organized by Azadeh Thiriez Arjangi, Jean-Paul Nicolaï, Stephanie Arel and Hsueh-i-Chen in Paris, and was dedicated to *The Course of recognition*.

The Jury of the Excellence Award was comprised of Azadeh Thiriez-Arjangi, Martina Weingärtner, Michael Johnson, George Taylor and was chaired by Jean-Luc Amalric.

The winner of the Excellence Award in 2025 is: Laure Gillot-Assayag, CNRS-JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow at Keio University (Japan), Associate Researcher at the Center of Knowledge on Politics – Research and Analysis (CESPRA), École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris (EHESS)

The title of her paper was: "The Dialectic between Recognition and Compromise: A Foundation for Contemporary Political Ethics?"

Jean-Luc Amalric

[1] Housed by the Fondation pour l'enfance, an officially recognized non-profit organization, the Fondation Goélands is dedicated to two causes: the fight against genetic diseases (funding studies and research projects) and support for young high school students and underprivileged students (awarding grants and financing equipment, etc.).

The Dialectic between Recognition and Compromise: A Foundation for Contemporary Political Ethics?

Laure Gillot-Assayag
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Introduction

Drawing on Paul Ricœur's thought, this article explores the relationship between recognition and compromise, examining both their points of convergence and divergence. It emphasizes the fundamental interdependence of these two concepts, arguing that they must be understood as interconnected to develop an appropriate political ethics for contemporary pluralistic societies.

Ricœur himself briefly addressed the relationship between recognition and compromise. Notably, he did so in a short interview entitled "Pour une éthique du compromis" (1991), as well as in *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004). In these works, he presents compromise as *the* form of mutual recognition:

> Compromise can thus be regarded as the form taken by mutual recognition in situations of conflict and dispute resulting from the plurality of economies of worth.[2]

Yet this enigmatic relationship has been overlooked in literature on recognition, including scholarship on Ricœur's work. In order to explore the underlying issues of this proposal, which is only hinted at in Ricœur's writings, we employ analogical reasoning across a network of imperfect correspondences to create a heuristic framework for addressing a question that would otherwise remain theoretically elusive.

The origins of compromise and recognition: a conceptual archaeology

In *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Ricœur performs a conceptual archaeology of recognition, revealing its multiple semantic layers. Although Ricœur's philosophical exploration of recognition begins with the "work of a lexicographer,"[3] this serves only as a starting point[4] that must never lose sight of its ultimate aim of providing a philosophical response to the "lexical" definition.[5]

[2] All translations are from the author of this article. Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance: Trois études* (Paris: Stock, 2004), 306-7.

[3] "While the use of lexicons is not uncommon in investigations of meaning in major philosophical works, it has occupied an unusual place in my research for reasons of semantic deficiency that surprise the philosophical researcher at the beginning of his investigation." Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance: Trois études* (Paris: Stock, 2004), 14.

[4] Ricœur, *Ibidem*.

[5] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 14-5.

Etymological similarities: "promise" as a common origin

Amid a myriad possible meanings, Ricœur argues that one can discern a form of "regulated polysemy"[6] for recognition, alongside an etymological lineage.

Ricœur starts his inquiry by highlighting the semantic polysemy of the term "recognition," with over twenty-three meanings listed in the *Littré* dictionary.[7] He notes that recognition derives from the Latin *re-cognoscere*, a combination of *re-* (again) and *cognoscere* (to know). This etymology conveys a two-way movement: returning to what is already known and identifying it as such. The second definition of recognition analyzed by Ricœur refers to identifying something entirely new. The third definition signals the transition from the domain of knowledge to that of truth (as in, "we have recognized his innocence"). According to Ricœur, the multiple meanings of recognition can be captured by three core ideas: "I. Grasping (an object) through thought, (...) II. Accepting and holding something to be true, III. Showing through gratitude that one is indebted to someone."[8]

Philosophical inquiry should seek to offset the effects of semantic dislocation. According to Ricœur, the conceptual dynamics of recognition are reflected in the grammatical inversion – from active to passive voice, or from the verb "to recognize" to "to be recognized."[9]

A similar approach can be applied to the analysis of the term "compromise." The *Littré* dictionary records no fewer than seven distinct definitions. Derived from the Latin *compromissum*, the past participle of *compromittere*—composed of *cum*—(together) and *promittere* (to promise)—compromise, as a past participle, is intrinsically linked to the active verb "to compromise." While the dictionary lists numerous meanings, they can be grouped together under the same logic of three categories: "I. To grant authority to arbitrators; to refer to a legal authority; II. To make concessions to solve a dispute, a disagreement; III. To jeopardize, to endanger, to be compromised."[10]

Far from being a mere pragmatic arrangement, a sacrifice, or a concession – as some works on this concept have suggested[11]—compromise rests etymologically on a *mutual promise*, that bind all parties involved.

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[6] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 11.

[7] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 18.

[8] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 27.

[9] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 35.

[10] Littré Dictionary, "Compromis 1. 2." Available at: https://www.littre.org/definition/compromis.2

[11] Most of the literature on compromise, which has been growing rapidly over the past decade, stems from the analytical tradition. Within this framework, compromise is viewed primarily in terms of process or outcome and often reduced to the notion of 'mutual concessions,' like in the following definition: "A compromise is an agreement, but not just any agreement. What distinguishes it are the mutual concessions it involves." Philippe Van Parijs, "What makes a good compromise?," *Government and Opposition* 3, no. 47 (2012): 469. My research on compromise has sought to reject this narrow definition of compromise and to demonstrate instead that compromise benefits from being redefined and reconceptualized from a Ricœurian perspective, *i.e.*, as a "creative and voluntary ethical intersection of different orders of magnitude." See Laure Assayag-Gillot, "Le compromis selon Paul Ricœur," *Négociations 1*, no. 29 (2018): 103-20.

Like recognition, compromise operates within the semantic fields of activity and passivity, acting and suffering[12]. In the passive sense, "being compromised" implies a change to the integrity or identity of the subject. In its active sense, "making compromises" or "compromising" denotes the voluntary submission of a dispute to joint mediation.

Like recognition, compromise retains also a semantic ambivalence, a "shadow of the negative"[13] bearing the stigma of possible degradation, as suggested by the expression "to compromise oneself." This dual nature reveals an ethical tension present in both compromise and recognition, both of which are essential to collective life but vulnerable to the "negative element inherent in their meaning[14]." As Ricœur writes, "Compromise is always under threat of being denounced as compromising by pamphleteers of all stripes."[15]

Analogous to the semantic fields of self-recognition and attestation, compromise and recognition thus "bring their respective harmonics"[16] but seem to converge on at least three salient aspects. First, compromise and recognition share a legal dimension ("recognition of debt"; "granting authority to arbitrators"). Second, even when referring to objects ("recognize something"; "compromise on something"), they are supported by a *subject* ("I recognize", "I compromise"). Finally, they are both rooted in the idea of a fiduciary *promise*[17]:

> Regarding promise, if it is not mutual, it is made to another person to whom one promises to give something tomorrow—that is, to cede—in exchange for a benefit previously received: a covenant is thus implied at the conclusion of this sequence of contractual acts.[18]

The concepts of compromise and recognition converge in the idea of a *contract* and the *voluntary surrender of rights*, which echoes Hobbes's theory of the state, in which individuals voluntarily cede their prerogatives to the sovereign. However, Ricœur argues that the Hobbesian conception of politics is flawed and misguided, because it disregards the concept of otherness.[19] For that reason, it is crucial not only to restore the political basis of the promise, but also its deeper, prior intersubjective roots.[20]

Promises create a space for commitment, binding the individual to others and to the future. This shared, promissory aspect of compromise and recognition establishes the basis for ethical relationships, in an extended temporality of mutual responsibility.

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[12] "The reversal of acting and suffering lies in the meaning of the act: 'I have endured my actions, I have not committed them' (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 437ff.)." (Ricœur, *Parcours*, 123).

[13] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 166.

[14] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 166.

[15] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 306.

[16] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 141.

[17] On the notion of promise in P. Ricœur, see the excellent work of Olivier Abel, *La promesse et la règle* (Paris: Michalon, 1996).

[18] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 247.

[19] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 250-251.

[20] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 182.

The mimetic path of recognition and compromise: from identification to attestation

Ricœur distinguishes three stages of recognition: identification, self-recognition and mutual recognition. Recognition-identification involves identifying the identification of some reference.[21] Self-recognition introduces ipseity, which is based on attestation—the expression of one's capacity in the form of a belief, "I believe I can".[22] The most complex form of recognition is mutual recognition. It presupposes not only attestation, but also a relationship of mutual reciprocity ("one another"), which does not negate the ongoing asymmetry between myself and others—when I relate to another person, I never become that person, who always retains their singularity and otherness. This stage does not suppress the previous moments of recognition, but rather integrates them into an open, non-totalizing dialectic:

> The gains of self-attestation-recognition are not lost, much less abolished, by the transition to the stage of mutual recognition.[23]

This capacity for self-distancing is precisely what makes it possible to recognize the legitimacy of other perspectives and create an intersubjective space for compromise. Both mutual recognition and authentic compromise emerge from the same dynamic: the ability to decenter oneself and step back from one's own position—a possibility rooted in the fact that the self is inscribed with alterity even prior to entering into dialogue with others.

In this sense, recognition and compromise share a similar relationship with temporality; both bring together the concept of promise (orientation towards the future) and memory (the preservation of the past).[24] In recognition, memory underpins the recognition-identification process ("I recognise what I have known"), while attestation structures the projection towards the future. In compromise, memory refers to the original convictions of the parties involved and past conflicts that remain present even after an agreement has been reached. Promises, meanwhile, sustain the mutual commitment to honouring the agreement over time.

> I would place the relation to the negative, listed above in third position, very high in the order of importance: memory and promise both have to contend with an opposite that is, for each, a mortal enemy, forgetting for memory, betrayal for promise, with all their ramifications and tricks.[25]

Similarly to recognition, compromise follows a dialectical progression characterized by its "relation to the negative."

Understanding compromise from a Ricœurian perspective, in its most accomplished form, would then mean reflecting on its conceptual "enemies" so as to discern, by contrast, its positive grounding in mutual affirmation. *Ethical* compromise presupposes an ability to recognize the

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[21] "At the initial stage of our journey, the 'what' to which recognition refers remains undifferentiated." Ricœur, *Parcours*, 38.

[22] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 140.

[23] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 361.

[24] "The problem of self-recognition reaches two peaks simultaneously with memory and promise. One looks to the past, the other to the future." Ricœur, *Parcours,* 165.

[25] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 188.

partial legitimacy of antagonistic positions and to construct a common shared space in spite of—and indeed through—competing convictions about the good life. One could then consider that a "good" Ricœurian compromise enacts a form of solicitude that acknowledges the vulnerability of self and others, safeguards irreplaceability, avoids the betrayal of promises, and maintains the possibility of sharing.[26]

Departing from interpretations that treat compromise and recognition as separate domains[27], our study reveals a conceptual connection that has so far gone unnoticed.

De La Justification by L. Boltanski and L. Thévenot: between intellectual debt and critical perspective

The concept of compromise put forward by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in *De la justification: Les économies de la grandeur* (1991) is an important reference point for understanding both the development of pragmatic sociology, but also Ricœur's reflections on compromise and recognition. Ricœur's interest for this sociological framework is evident in several of his texts.[28] He himself observes: "I believe that this is the only important text in the humanities that deals with compromise."[29]

Although the field of scholarship on compromise might have expanded considerably since the 1990s, Boltanski and Thévenot were indeed among the first sociologists to examine how social actors justify their actions and reach agreements through compromise. According to their theory, compromise arises when individuals belonging to different 'cities' or 'worlds' (such as commercial, industrial, civic, domestic, opinion or inspired worlds) manage to "suspend their dispute without resorting to adjudication within a single world."[30] Compromise therefore takes the form of a composite agreement that does not eradicate the variety of justifying principles, but rather temporarily arranges them into a configuration that is acceptable to all parties.

Ricœur acknowledges his intellectual debt to the sociologists, whose work seems to provide a conceptual framework for addressing the plurality of spheres of justice and their

[26] "It is from the relationship between *autos* and *héauton* that I will start to develop a comprehensive concept of solicitude, based fundamentally on the exchange between giving and receiving." Paul Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 220.

[27] Recognition theories have so far avoided any reflection on compromise, just as compromise theories have ignored the contributions of recognition theories to their investigations.

[28] In Ricœur, *Parcours*; Paul Ricœur, *Le Juste, 1* (Paris: Esprit, 1995) and in Paul Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis".

[29] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique," 1.

[30] Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *De La justification, Les économies de la grandeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 337.

competing justifications[31]. He draws on the insights of pragmatic sociology[32] and adapts them slightly, as he establishes an explicit parallel between compromise and recognition:

> The forms of compromise that these authors evoke at the end of their work are reminiscent of the kinds of truce represented by states of *agape* and their horizon of reconciliation.[33]

> The paradox, however, is that the status of presupposition, which seems to impose itself as the end of compromise-driven conduct, is only verified – *justified* – by the capacity of the common good to relativize belonging to any particular city. On the individual level, this corresponds to the *capacity to recognize oneself*[34] as a figure of transition between different regimes of worth, without becoming ensnared in the oscillation between disillusioned relativism and pamphleteering accusation.[35]

Ricœur's approach to the theory of justification is both critical and transformative. He bases compromise on the "capacity for self-recognition" among individuals. Although he adopts key aspects of the theory, such as the idea of an irreducible plurality of worlds and the role of the disagreement (*dispute*) in the absence of a single justification, he rearranges them around the central concept of recognition that these compromises presuppose:

> But the interest, in my opinion, lies elsewhere: it lies in the ability to awaken, through criticism, each actor in one world to the values of another world, even if it means changing worlds. A new dimension of the person is thus revealed, that of understanding a world other than one's own, a capacity that can be compared to learning a foreign language to the point of perceiving one's own language as one among others.[36]

The relationship between recognition and compromise can be understood through the paradigm of linguistic hospitality and mutual understanding.[37] Hospitality implies unconditional openness to others, based on gift-giving and gratitude—the dimension of recognition—as well as the establishment of conditional rules to ensure peaceful coexistence—the dimension of

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[31] Paul Ricœur, "La pluralité des instances de justices", in *Le Juste, 1* (Paris: Esprit, 1995), 121-43. However, the influence is reciprocal: the sociologists likewise recognize their intellectual indebtedness to Ricœur. "Due to its exceptional scope, Paul Ricœur's philosophical work contributed in various ways to the renewal of French sociology coined as the 'pragmatic' turn. Without claiming to offer a comprehensive account, this article, together with Marc Breviglieri's contribution (see his article in the same issue), reflects sociological readings of the philosopher that connect the aims of justice, authority, and recognition to human anthropological capacities and their vulnerability." Laurent Thévenot, "Des Institutions en Personne. Une sociologie pragmatique en dialogue avec Paul Ricœur," *Études ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012), 11.

[32] The pragmatic conception of compromise has several characteristics: it is fundamentally descriptive, rooted in the observation of social practices; it does not treat compromise as a normative foundation of societies; and it conceives compromise as a temporary suspension of a dispute.

[33] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 361.

[34] Italicization is our own.

[35] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 307.

[36] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 305-6.

[37] Paul Ricœur, *Sur la traduction* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2016).

compromise. "Ethical" compromise is a fundamental mode of mutual recognition. It stands in opposition to the untranslatable, and by extension to intransigence. "Intransigence unfortunately makes any search for compromise impossible."[38]

In this respect, Ricœur's concept of compromise differs significantly from that of Boltanski and Thévenot.

On the one hand, Ricœur fully embraces the ethical dimension of *awakening to recognition*, made possible through compromise. The richness of compromise lies in its capacity to awaken and attune each individual to the values of other worlds, potentially prompting a change of world—that is, a revision of reference frameworks and values. While sociologists treat compromise as a practical response to plural orders of justification, Ricœur considers it to be an essential ethical aspect of our relationships with others. This reveals a political condition characterized by pluralism and the desire for recognition. His interpretation of compromise is unique, as it is rooted in his anthropology of capable individuals, where the self is not defined by essence, but by capacities: the ability to speak, act, narrate one's own story, and to hold oneself accountable.

For Ricœur, compromise is much more than a pragmatic "tinkering" exercise or a social regulatory mechanism. It is a fundamental ethical act that establishes a relationship of recognition between the parties, even if that relationship remains asymmetrical and fragile. Conflicts and tensions provide the basis for both recognition and compromise, and must work together like two complementary chemicals to ensure the peaceful desire to live together.

The tension between recognition and compromise: pathways to living together?

Recognition and compromise are mutually dependent; neither can exist in isolation. They function as complementary elements within a productive dialectic, acting as counterbalances and limiting each other's excessive claims. The tension between "conflictuality and shared generosity"[39] that characterizes recognition is mirrored in compromise. Rather than being an obstacle, conflict provides the impetus for ethical relationships, which form the foundation of any political community. In Ricœur's terms, recognition involves moving beyond mere negative tolerance—simply enduring the opinions of those with whom one disagrees[40]—towards a genuine acceptance of difference as a constitutive element of both our relationships with others and the social fabric itself. Similarly, compromise involves voluntarily reconciling conflicting values without reducing them to a neutralized consensus, and thus sustains a desire to live together that remains perpetually unfinished and continually renewed:

> This need stems not only from what is active and unfinished in the living together, but also from the kind of deficiency or lack inherent in the very relationship of the self to its own existence.[41]

[38] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis", 2.

[39] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 363.

[40] Paul Ricœur, "Tolérance, intolérance, intolérable" (1990), in *Lectures, vol. 1: Autour du politique* (Seuil, 2014), 295-312.

[41] Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 218.

Recognition: the condition for genuine compromise

I wish to advance the hypothesis that the dynamics of recognition prevent compromise from becoming a mere strategic calculation or a power struggle. Without recognition, compromise risks becoming a mere suspension of hostilities, driven solely by utilitarian considerations.

Recognition, as identification, is a necessary precondition for compromise. Before engaging in discussion or deliberation, it is essential to identify one's own values and to acknowledge the other party as a legitimate participant in the conflict. Self-recognition involves perceiving oneself as capable of acting, judging, deliberating, upholding one's convictions through promises and, crucially, making concessions without negating oneself. In other words, in order to be accountable within a compromise, one must first be able to recognise oneself through one's actions.

Mutual recognition is also the *ethical core* of compromise. To avoid an agreement becoming a wrong compromise of principles, each party must acknowledge a minimum level of symmetry in the relationship, even if it falls short of perfect equality. Without such recognition, compromise loses its ethical focus and becomes mere compromising. As Ricœur explains, "There is no confusion in compromise as there is in compromising. In compromise, everyone remains in their place; no one is stripped of their order of justification."[42]

Mutual recognition safeguards compromise against the instrumentalization of orders of justification and the consequent failure to respect the values and individuals within those orders. For compromise to be authentic—an exchange of mutual promises—each party must consent to concessions, not simply because of an unfavourable balance of power, but because they recognize the legitimate existence of the other party. It is precisely this mutual recognition that distinguishes genuine compromise from capitulation, manipulation and oppression.

Compromise: the practical realization of recognition

The converse is also true. The journey of recognition cannot be secured without compromise. When viewed as a dialogical process that mediates between identities, interests and values, compromise becomes the *means by which recognition is realized*, enabling individuals to be acknowledged both ethically and politically without causing harm to others. By navigating identity conflicts triggered by calls for recognition, compromise enables recognition to transcend potential deadlocks and articulate practical solutions that balance conflicting values. Without such mediation, recognition becomes a mere juxtaposition of insular identities, incapable of sustaining a shared world.

Ricœur highlights the dangers of unmediated recognition, which can lead to an endless pursuit of validation. In *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, he cautions against approaches that prioritizes difference over commonality among various conceptions of the good. This relentless quest of recognition, he argues, produces an "unhappy consciousness" or a "bad infinitude,"[43] trapping individuals in perpetual victimhood as they chase an unattainable, monolithic ideal that renders

[42] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis," 1.

[43] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 317-18.

any form of tangible recognition unsatisfactory. Consequently, the relationship with others becomes antagonistic, to the detriment of ethics.

This is where compromise comes in, as a *means of regulating* excessive demands for recognition. The aim is not to eliminate tensions or deny differences, but to channel them into a politically viable form. The search for agreement provides a framework through which claims for recognition can be expressed, debated and partially fulfilled, preventing them from tipping into absolutism or resentment. As Ricœur emphasises, compromise is never a final resolution; rather, it establishes a temporary equilibrium that allows different parties to coexist while maintaining their identities despite their ongoing disagreements:

> Compromise is always weak and revocable, but it is the only means of achieving the common good. We can only achieve the common good through compromise between strong but rival references.[44]

The absence of recognition is often perceived as contempt, frequently giving rise to profound social conflicts and even civil wars.[45] Ricœur suggests that it is precisely through compromise that a "barrier between agreement and violence" is established:

> We could even say that compromise is our only response to violence in the absence of an order recognized by all.[46]

In other words, when people have different ideas about what is good, they have two basic choices: they can either resort to violence or seek compromise. This highlights the importance of not framing compromise as opposed to struggles for recognition. Conflict does not simply disappear; rather, a structured form of conflict, shaped by democratic institutions and moderated through practical, non-violent compromises based on recognition, is essential for building "states of peace" (*états de paix*).

The combination of recognition and compromise as key to creating the states of peace

The rise of exclusive identity claims undermines the productive relationship between recognition and compromise. When identity is viewed as an unchanging essence rather than an evolving narrative open to encounters with difference, mutual recognition becomes challenging, and compromise may be perceived as betrayal.

However, bringing together compromise and recognition opens up a prospect of pacification – not just a temporary halt to hostilities, but a genuine acknowledgement of the legitimacy of opposing views and their irreconcilable differences:

[44] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis," 2.

[45] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 293-4.

[46] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis," 2.

> It is in the absence of agreement that we make compromises for the sake of civic peace. (...) Since we only have fragmentary references, it is between these references that we are forced to make compromises.[47]

These two concepts can be combined to consider civic peace. In contexts where there is no shared consensus or universally accepted moral order, compromise is necessary. This *temporarily* stabilizes competing claims for recognition by establishing a form of symbolic truce within the confrontation. Therefore, compromise cannot be purely procedural; the logic of mutual recognition continually reminds us of the ethical requirement for genuine reciprocity.

The productive tension between recognition and compromise is then seen in a new light as a vital source of political creativity. This interplay encourages us to view the political community as an ever-evolving entity, rather than as a static entity to be attained. As Ricœur observes, "it is the capacity for compromise that opens up privileged access to the common good."[48] The "will-to-live-together" is not established once and for all, but must be continually reinvented through the tension between recognition and compromise.

Democratic institutions play a crucial role in mediating the relationship between recognition and compromise. They provide spaces for discussion and debate where demands for recognition can be expressed and considered, while imposing procedural constraints that encourage stakeholders to seek compromise.

- *The Algerian War: the tragic consequences of denying recognition and compromise*

The Algerian War (1954-1962) offers a paradigmatic example of the disastrous consequences of a denial of political recognition. In an archive of the Ricœur Fund, a handwritten note by Ricœur entitled "Negotiating in Algeria" asserts with striking clarity: "I consider the refusal to *recognize*[49] the existence of the Algerian national fact to be a lost battle."[50] A "Ricœurian" analysis of the struggle for recognition can help identify the various forms of denial of recognition, such as the denial of alterity, the ignorance of power relations and the refusal to acknowledge the systematic violence inflicted on colonized peoples at that time.

These multiple forms of denial prevented the emergence of a genuine political compromise, which would have required, upstream, the recognition of the other's political existence. Ricœur emphasizes how the refusal of recognition opens the way to violence and the collapse of political bonds, reactivating a Hobbesian state of nature in which everyone becomes a threat to others. On another occasion, he writes: "I interpret: misrecognition knows itself as the

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[47] Ricœur, "Pour une éthique du compromis," 2.

[48] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 306.

[49] Italics indicate my own emphasis.

[50] Paul Ricœur, "Négocier en Algérie" (Negotiating in Algeria), Fonds Ricœur, conf. 050.2, 1956.

Paul Ricœur, who was sensitive to both the Algerian cause and the situation of French residents in Algeria, adopted a nuanced view of the war. Initially in favor of colonial reform, he gradually evolved toward supporting independence. See Jean-Pierre Peyroulou, "Paul Ricœur, Esprit et la guerre d'Algérie," *La Revue des revues* 2, no. 66 (2021), 88-97; Paul Ricœur, "La question coloniale." Fonds Ricœur IIIA15. Réforme 3, no. 131 (1947), 1–2; Ernst Wolff, "Presentation: Paul Ricœur, 'the Question of the Colonies'." *Études Ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 21-5.

denial of that recognition called peace."[51] The Algerian War of Independence was a struggle for liberation that illustrates the consequences of a profound denial of political recognition and failure of compromise to find a mutually recognized political solution before the outbreak of full-scale violence.

The inability to implement recognition and compromise led to war and disaster. The refusal to engage in dialogue radicalized the independence movement, triggering a violent conflict that lasted eight years, caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, and led the torture of Algerian civilians by the French police. This example tragically illustrates why the denial of political recognition can set in motion a cycle of violence. It is plausible that mutual recognition, based on an ethics of compromise, could have prevented this violent episode, which left deep scars on both French and Algerian societies until now.

- *Martin Luther King and the Struggle for the Recognition of Civil Rights*

The figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., cited in *Amour et Justice* [52] alongside other non-violent figures such as Saint Francis and Gandhi, exemplifies in contrast the transformative and pacifying potential of a struggle for recognition conducted through non-violence and guided by compromise. Grounded in an appeal to shared democratic values, Reverend King was able to articulate the specific claims of the African-American community alongside the universal principles of the American Declaration of Independence, thereby constructing a fruitful dialectic between the *particularity* of recognition and the *universality* of the will-to-live-together. His famous "I Have a Dream" speech perfectly embodies this dialectic: the dream is both rooted in the particular experiences of African Americans and open to a universal horizon of fraternity and equality. This articulation between the recognition of differences and the affirmation of a shared humanity forms the very foundation of an authentic ethics of compromise. In this case, King's approach shows that the dialectics of recognition and compromise can itself bring about a social revolution. By pursuing justice through nonviolent means and institutional channels, he transformed society, reshaping legal, political, and moral norms profoundly.

King's approach rested on three foundational pillars that illustrate the productive tension between recognition and compromise: active non-violence, the call for mutual recognition, and the engagement of institutions through the pursuit of compromise. The compromise pursued did not involve abandoning principles[53]; rather, it served as a vehicle for recognition that helped preserve the commitment to living together, to forge alliances and find points of intersection with other

[51] Ricœur, *Parcours,* 243

[52] Paul Ricœur, *Amour et Justice* (Paris: Points, 2008), 118.

[53] Thus, Martin Luther King refused to abandon the value of equality, just as the French resistance fighters of World War II opposed Hitler when most politicians were guilty of shameful compromises. On the virtue of intransigence, see Richard H. Weisberg, *In Praise of Intransigence, The Perils of Flexibility,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). When political recognition is denied, firmness is preferable to avoid becoming complicit in reprehensible behavior, such as torture, discrimination, or even extermination. In this case, asserting one's convictions is necessary, and preserving one's values is preferable to any compromise.

political communities within the *polis*. From this perspective, compromise stands in opposition to sectarianism, that reduces any compromise to a "rotten compromise."[54]

Nonviolent strategies have enabled significant progress, most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, granting African Americans legal protections against discrimination and ensuring their right to vote. As King emphasized, however, legal recognition represents only one stage in a longer process of genuine recognition, which must also be reflected in social practices and collective consciousness. In "L'homme non violent et sa présence à l'histoire," Ricœur considers the act of the non-violent man as an "excessive gesture," a vivid experience that cannot "become institutionalized."[55]Although legal recognition is only a preliminary step towards full social recognition, which requires consolidation through societal practices and shared collective representations, King's example suggests – perhaps this time in contrast to Ricœur's perspective – that the discourse of non-violent actors can be institutionalised through recognition mechanisms.

The question of the "duty of memory[56]" arises after profound denials of recognition. Memories of conflicts or wars are often politically instrumentalized[57], making it difficult to cultivate a memory that is neither antagonistic nor merely performative, but genuinely reconciliatory. Competing claims among victims further complicate this task. In this context, the "uses and abuses[58]" of the duty of memory must give way to the sustained, reflective work of

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[54] "Sectarianism is a disposition to view any compromise as rotten." Avishai Margalit, *On Compromise and Rotten Compromises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 184. About sectarians, Nancy Rosenblum writes the following: "They look to disrupt constitutional order, oppose democratic institutions and legal processes of change, threaten violence against or on behalf of policies, and believe political opponents should be destroyed (often on the view that "we" are the real citizens and "they" are alien)." Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of Angels, An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 372.

[55] In this short text on non-violence, Ricœur presents the non-violent man as voicing prophetic conviction rather than mere political considerations. See Ricœur, *Parcours,* 56; Paul Ricœur, "L'homme Non Violent et Sa Présence à l'histoire," *Esprit* 2, no. 153, (1949): 224-34. The philosopher never revisited this theme of nonviolence thereafter. One hypothesis put forward is that his position may have radically changed on the question, as it no longer seemed relevant to him (see Bernard Quelquejeu, "La lutte non violente," *art. cit*.). I would tend to believe, in fact, that nonviolent leaders who became famous after this article, such as Martin Luther King, could have changed his position: King indeed linked the prophetic element (love) with political responsibility (justice), and precisely created institutions, by enabling the granting of civil rights that had been denied to African Americans. Ricœur's conception of the nonviolent actor seems to us excessively prophetic and perhaps linked to a certain misunderstanding of the political and ethical stakes of nonviolent movements.

[56] "What will be called the duty of memory in the next study consists essentially in the duty not to forget. Thus, a large part of the work on the past is guided by the imperative not to forget." Paul Ricœur*, La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 37.

[57] "It is precisely insofar as the proclamation of the duty of memory remains captive to the symptom of haunting that it continually vacillates between use and abuse. Indeed, the way the duty of memory is proclaimed can itself constitute an abuse of memory, similar to the abuses denounced earlier under the notion of manipulated memory. These are no longer manipulations in the strict sense defined by the ideological relation between discourse and power, but operate in a subtler manner, as a 'guidance of conscience' that claims to act as the spokesperson for victims' demands for justice." Ricœur*, La mémoire,* 109.

[58] Ricœur*, La mémoire,* 111.

memory – a work that can only be meaningful when it participates in a broader dialectic of recognition and compromise.

The duty of memory alone cannot prevent the recurrence of intolerance or extreme violence. Yet, so-called "liminal" traumatic experiences can serve as mnemonic matrices, offering a foundation for understanding claims for justice and reparations. When memory is paired with recognition and ethical compromise, it allows for the possibility of social reconciliation: forgiveness and the voices of victims are honored, without being co-opted by external agendas. Memory, recognition, and compromise can work together to temper the excesses of each. Recognition requires acknowledging the peculiarity of past injustices, while an ethics of compromise requires that these memories not be instrumentalized and are integrated into a shared narrative. Together, they support the pursuit of a society capable of confronting past wrongs, while sustaining a shared commitment to coexistence.

Minimal or maximal political ethics?

These historical cases emphasize the importance of ethical politics grounded in just institutions, mutual recognition, and genuine democratic compromise.

According to Ricœur, the ethical dimension of power not only lies in the will-to-live-together but also in the control and regulation of violence, which, paradoxically, represent the most visible expression of power.[59]

Ricœur reminds us that institutions are just not only when they are anchored in a "sense of justice", but also when they mediate the "conflictual consensus" of civil society."[60] "This is why we are more likely to encounter compromises than consensus in agreements."[61] Consensus among actors rarely manifests as harmonious agreement; more often, it takes the form of a fragile compromise underpinned by persistent conflict. Therefore, institutions must be stable enough to embed mutual recognition within the democratic framework, yet flexible enough to respond to new demands for recognition.

Are the political ethics of democracy maximal or minimal? I will leave this judgement to the reader. However, it is worth noting that although Ricœur characterizes his project in *Oneself as Another* as a "small ethics", his inquiry constitutes in fact a profound rethinking of moral and political philosophy.

Conclusion

Ricœur's approach to recognition cannot be reduced to a single notion. I argued that the structuring role of compromise, specifically through an "ethics of compromise", should not be

[59] Refer especially to Paul Ricœur, "Éthique et politique," *Autres Temps. Les cahiers du christianisme social*, no. 5 (1985): 58-70 and Paul Ricœur, "Quelle éthique en politique?" *Bulletin du Centre protestant d'études et de documentation* IIA427, Fonds Ricœur, no. 334 (september-october 1988), 3-8.

[60] Paul Ricœur, "Le Cercle de La Démonstration", *Esprit* 135, vol. 2 (1988b), 78-88.

[61] Ricœur, *Parcours*, 301.

underestimated as it helps to ensure that recognition does not descend into negative or instrumentalized forms. In order to remain ethical and avoid such pitfalls, compromise must fully embrace the dialectical logic inherent in recognition. In other words, recognition must form the basis of "good compromise," respecting the axiological pluralism inherent in our societies.

If compromise is treated as a mere strategic transaction, devoid of ethical consideration and insensitive to the identities and social esteem of those involved, it can threaten recognition. In this case, compromise risks leading to superficial or unjust agreements. Conversely, demands for recognition can impede compromise when they harden into rigid identity claims, closed to dialogue and to the partial renunciations required by any democratic agreement. In its absolutist form, recognition undermines the open-mindedness that is essential for compromise. This highlights the importance of viewing recognition and compromise as interdependent, with each tempering the potential excesses of the other.

Together, these concepts appear to define the principles of a modern ethics based on recognition *and* compromise. Demands for recognition necessitate vigilance against the various forms of denial that may arise within the political arena. At the same time, they demand a practical commitment to compromise on the part of institutions and the wider political community, translating mutual recognition among citizens into institutional practices.

My intention was to demonstrate that democracy is sustained, above all, by the living tension between recognition and compromise — and that it is maybe the only interplay capable of integrating diverse conceptions of the good with the collective effort to create a shared world.

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