

PART 3 (Julia Ponzio)

Recognition and Forgiveness From Hegel to Levinas

1. *P r e m i s e*

Phenomenology of spirit is an important milestone for contemporary theories of recognition, in particular for the analysis of recognition in the master-slave dialectic. In the last pages of the chapter entitled *Spirit*, Hegel establishes a strange link between recognition and forgiveness. Often this link goes unnoticed in the readings that dwell on the analysis of recognition in the master-slave dialectic. Forgiveness in the *Phenomenology of spirit* is the last figure of recognition, and through forgiveness all the contradictions of recognition can be solved.

Is it possible to think of recognition without connecting it with forgiveness? Can recognition rescue itself from its contradictions without this link?

These are the questions from which we start in this text.

Where can we find the answers?

Contemporary French philosophy offers important analyses of the concept of forgiveness. We refer in particular to the works of Jankèlèvitch, Levinas and Derrida.

Starting from these texts and considering Levinas' works in particular, we propose to reflect here on the link between recognition and forgiveness.

2. *F o r g i v e n e s s a s a k i n d o f r e c o g n i t i o n*

To understand the link between recognition and forgiveness it is important to recall how this contact is established in Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit*.

The first problem of recognition in the *Phenomenology of spirit* is the contradiction between individual consciousness and universal duty, that is the contradiction between the recognition of myself as *homme*, as individual, and the recognition of myself as *citoyen*, as belonging to a socio-political community.

In the chapter *Spirit* this apparently irreconcilable contradiction is overcome.

Moral action supported by the *moral conviction* is what resolves the contradiction between individual consciousness and universal duty. Consciousness acquires in *Spirit* what Hegel calls moral conviction, that is the certainty that universal duty is internal to consciousness

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itself. In this way, universal duty is no longer considered as something external or abstract. This means that individual consciousness must no longer sacrifice itself to moral duty. In this way consciousness is no longer compelled to choose between itself and duty: choosing itself is to choose moral duty and choosing moral duty is to choose itself.

Moral action puts into concrete form the link between individual consciousness and moral duty: acting consciousness realises moral duty and at the same time it realises itself.

Moreover, moral action is what makes recognition possible. *Acting consciousness* recognises itself as what through moral action realises the overcoming of the contradiction between individual consciousness and moral duty. But the contact between individual consciousness and moral duty cannot be linked only to the contingency of moral action. This is the reason why language is necessary. Language universalises moral action which is the connection between individual consciousness and universal duty. Thanks to language, consciousness can define itself as the connection between individuality and universal duty. In this definition consciousness can recognise itself. This definition makes the recognition of consciousness universal and effective.

But at this point a further contradiction appears in Hegel's analysis. Individual consciousness recognises the morality of its action, or better, it recognises itself in the morality of its action. The problems now are: what are the bases of self-recognition? What justifies this self-recognition? This question about the justification or the foundation of self-recognition is posed by what Hegel calls *judging consciousness*. The apparition of judging consciousness is the moment in which acting consciousness finds itself face to face with another consciousness.

The individual consciousness, that recognises itself, meets the other as the one that asks for justification for the self-recognition of the acting consciousness.

So the consciousness that recognises itself is judged by another consciousness. Now the problem is no longer the contradiction between universal and individual: we now have opposition between two facing individuals. Judging consciousness, the latter, opens to doubt the universality of recognition, which the acting consciousness, the former, had reached with a great effort. Acting consciousness declares, says and recognises its universality and judging consciousness asks for a justification and without this justification it refuses to recognise the consciousness that has already recognised itself.

At this point Hegel shows that the individuality of consciousness,
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which provokes this last contradiction of recognition, is also what makes possible the definitive overcoming of all contradictions of recognition. Individuality separates and prevents individuals from reciprocal recognition, but individuality is also what the acting consciousness and the judging consciousness have in common.

Recognising individuality as what the acting and the judging consciousness have in common can lead to universal recognition.

Therefore, thanks to individuality, acting consciousness recognises itself in judging consciousness, it recognises a communion because both consciousnesses are individual consciousnesses.

At this point acting consciousness confesses its individuality. It makes this confession because it hopes that judging consciousness will also recognise its own singularity.

But this, says Hegel, does not happen.

Judging consciousness does not recognise itself in what has been

confessed, it does not recognise individuality as a common element. The answer of judging consciousness is silence.

Why does this silence suddenly appear?

The question posed by judging consciousness to acting consciousness was to justify the universality that acting consciousness had recognised for itself. Acting consciousness answers this question—as a *coup de théâtre*—confessing its individuality. The confession of its individuality is the confession of the impossibility of justifying self-recognition of its own universality. This confession, therefore, is a reaction to the question posed by acting consciousness, but it is not an answer, it is the declaration of the impossibility of such an answer.

This is the reason why the first reaction of judging consciousness after the confession is silence. It is surprised at an unexpected answer that leads discourse in a completely different direction.

Forgiveness unexpectedly interrupts this silence—as a second *coup de théâtre*. Judging consciousness forgives confessed individuality.

In this asymmetrical exchange of confession and forgiveness (only the acting consciousness confesses and only the judging consciousness forgives) mutual recognition is at last realised.

Confession and forgiveness make possible a true dialogue between two individual consciousnesses. True dialogue means for us a dialogue where answers are not already contained in the questions and, therefore, they are always totally unexpected. Confession and forgiveness are in fact unexpected answers, they exceed every possibility of prevision of the direction of discourse, they are two *coup de théâtre*, as we said.

Mutual recognition takes place in this true dialogue. By confessing and forgiving their individuality, says Hegel, consciousnesses overcome their differences without cancelling them, recognising the

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identity of individuality. In this way individuality itself, confessed and forgiven, is recognised as the foundation of intersubjectivity. But the link between forgiveness and recognition is still not clear enough. It is not clear enough why in Hegel's analysis forgiveness makes recognition possible. To clarify this connection we shall try to better understand what forgiveness is.

In the act of forgiveness—individuality in Hegel's discourse—both who is asking for forgiveness and who is forgiving recognise what is forgiven. Moreover, what is forgiven is recognised and overcome in the act of forgiveness, that is to say, transcended. What is forgiven is at the same time recognised and transcended. So forgiveness is what makes possible both the recognition of individuality and the recognition of the possibility of transcending individuality.

Therefore, in the complex Hegelian description recognition is what makes transcendence possible. Forgiveness is the kind of recognition that transcends what is recognised. So, reading these pages of *Phenomenology*, forgiveness appears as a particular kind of recognition, or, better, it appears as the only kind of recognition that is free from contradictions. Therefore, forgiveness is recognition that does not stop at the recognised but transcends it, uses it as a sign—we could say as a trace—of something

else. Moreover forgiveness, as a particular kind of recognition, has a double direction: in the act of forgiveness we recognise what is forgiven as something we can transcend and at once we recognise ourselves in this possibility of transcendence.

3. *Recognition as forgiveness and recognition as excuse*

In truth the word forgiveness only appears three or four times in *Phenomenology*. We have dwelt on an aspect in a complex discourse that from here leads directly to the 'absolute spirit'. This operation of emphasising a moment in a long process means to force Hegelian discourse, but sometimes it enables us to underline elements that are very important to us for an analysis of recognition.

As seen, one of these elements is the link between recognition and forgiveness: forgiveness is a kind of recognition that implicates the transcendence of what is recognised.

But dwelling on these few pages we may also underline another important element that is the opposition between the recognition of something that has inside itself the justification of its recognition and the recognition of what confesses to not having inside itself the justification of its recognition.

In *Le pardon* Vladimir Jankélévitch defines these two forms of recognition as forgiveness and excuse. Here, it is useful to our discourse to recall this distinction.

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Forgiveness, says Jankélévitch in this text, has three fundamental characteristics: it is an event, it implicates a personal relation with the other and it is a free gift. On the contrary, excuse has none of these characteristics of forgiveness. Excuse, Jankélévitch says, is not linked to the understanding of what must be excused. What appeared unjust, is linked by excuse to its causes and thus justified. Injustice is excused, says Jankélévitch, as apparent injustice. When we have understood its causes, injustice disappears: it was only a misunderstanding. For Jankélévitch this means that excuse is not an event. The possibility of excuse is still inside what is apparently unjust. Moreover, the excuse it is not a personal relation because anybody can make the misunderstanding clear and when the causes of injustice are understood, anybody can justify the apparent injustice and anybody can excuse. And, finally, that the excusable act has the possibility of excuse within itself means that excuse is not a free gift.

Therefore, by recognising the apparent injustice as justice, the excuse means to understand the causes, it is a justification of apparent injustice.

Is this justification in Hegel's discourse that judging consciousness asks acting consciousness? Judging consciousness asks acting consciousness to justify its self-recognition so that it can be excused. Judging consciousness expects that acting consciousness has the elements for its recognition inside itself. But acting consciousness confesses that it cannot justify its self-recognition and this means that self-recognition is not excusable, that unjustifiability of this self-recognition is not only apparent.

Therefore, in the silence after the confession acting consciousness

loses the role of what must be justified and judging consciousness loses the role of what must recognise judging and justifying. After such silence recognition can no longer mean recognition of someone under a mask.

After confession recognition must have a new meaning: is recognition of what does not have within itself the justification of recognition possible?

Forgiveness, the prelude in *Phenomenology* to mutual recognition, is the affirmative answer to this question. Not only is recognition of what does not have within itself the justification of recognition possible, but also this kind of recognition is the only kind of recognition possible without contradictions, the only possibility of overcoming, of transcending the autism of individuality.

The confession that acting consciousness does not have within itself the justification of recognition, means that this recognition must really come from the other, that is to say, that without the other no recognition is possible. Confession means that recognition can only

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happen in a personal relation with the other, can only be an event and a free gift: this means that recognition is only possible as forgiveness.

4. *The connection between recognition as excuse and recognition as forgiveness*

We have distinguished between two kinds of recognition: recognition as forgiveness and recognition as excuse. Our question is now: are these two alternative routes or can they be thought together?

We may look for an answer in Levinas' thought, because for Levinas forgiveness is an important moment in the process of recognition.

In *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* Levinas recalls the Hegelian analysis of recognition of the other as one of the moments in which the history of philosophy leaves ontology for transcendence.

In Levinas' work there are no textual references to the Hegelian analysis of forgiveness, but forgiveness is a frequent theme in his thought.

In Levinas the problem of forgiveness is linked with analysis of the concept of the present. According to Levinas, the present is fundamental to the process of recognition. In fact, it is the moment in which interiority recognises itself separating from the *il y a*. What characterises the present is that it is not inside history, it does not have an origin that can justify itself.

We have seen in Hegel as well, the moment of self-recognition does not have any possible justification.

As soon as a present appears without reasons, without motivations, interiority is constituted and can recognise itself. But, from this very first moment, the present is no longer free. As says Levinas after its free beginning, the present is condemned to be, to flow as the past in consciousness. As soon as interiority is constituted, the present is inserted in what Levinas calls "economic time", and this means that the present is linked with a past and a future, caught in the identity in which I recognise myself. The present becomes a part of my identity, a part of the tale of my life. In this tale, my present has a justification always, based on my past and on the future, towards which it is oriented. Economic time is the time in which I may answer the

question “who are you?” by telling the story of my life. This time is constituted thanks to the present without any origins or justifications, but once this time is constituted a present without origin and justification is no longer possible.

In the present I recognise myself by separating myself from the *il y a*, I begin to tell the tale of my life and through this tale I ask the other to recognise me because this tale justifies recognition. So, once the present has been caught in economic time, identity thinks it has the justification of its recognition within itself.

But, as we have seen by reading Hegel, if identity has within

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itself the justification of its recognition, there is no longer any possibility of a true dialogue and a true relation with the other.

In this case recognition can only be self-recognition, it cannot really come from the other because identity that has the justification of recognition inside itself does not need the other’s justification. In this case recognition is superfluous, similarly to excuse in Jankèlèvitch’s discourse.

At this point forgiveness is the only act that can return to its freedom and to its unjustifiability to the present, being free from the vice of past and future.

What kind of present are we now talking about? Which is the present that needs to be forgiven? In particular, the present that needs to be forgiven is here the present in which identity has been constituted, that is the present in which I tell the tale of my story as the justification of my recognition and place in a socio-political community.

Forgiving this present, the present in which begins the tale of my life, means to return to this present because of its unjustifiability: it can be forgiven because it does not have its justification within itself. So identity finds in its origin, in the moment in which it begins to tell the story that recognition without justification is forgiveness. To find forgiveness in the origin of identity means to find here the possibility of the relation with otherness.

Forgiveness, says Levinas, does not justify inserting in a history, does not justify by virtue of an history, and the act of forgiveness itself does not have a justification, because what is justified does not need forgiveness.

For these reasons forgiveness is only possible in a personal relation. Forgiveness is possible says Levinas in “Le Moi et la Totalité”, only in an intimate relation, in what he calls *en tre nous*, and not in a “real society”. Only in a relation between an “I” and a “you” is recognition of the unjustifiable possible.

This particular kind of recognition without justification consists, as stated, in the transcendence of what is recognised.

Is it possible to connect this particular kind of recognition to recognition that overcomes the intersubjective relation, the relation between an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ and founds sociality? It is precisely this connection that emerges as the most interesting aspect of the Levinasian analysis of the relation between recognition and forgiveness.

Therefore, a double meeting takes place in the present in which I

begin to tell my story. The other that I meet in this present is not only the other with which I establish the relation of the *entre nous* where forgiveness is possible. The other I meet in this present is also, as Levinas says, the Third. The Third is the other that asks for a justification of the present of interiority, that asks interiority to have inside itself

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the elements that justify its place in the world so that this place can be recognised by the other. Consequently, the other is both the possibility of the forgiveness of my present, of the recognition of what has no justification, and the cause of the beginning of the tale of my identity, that justify myself and the recognition of my place. To the question of the Third I can only answer, I can't help answering with the tale of my story in which are the elements that justify my recognition. With this story I ask the other to recognise my role, my position and my act, but when I ask the answer is still inside the question. Only at the origin of identity, says Levinas, is it possible to rediscover the possibility of forgiveness. Forgiveness as we have seen, is a particular kind of recognition that transcends what is recognised. But in what direction is the originally present, in which I meet the other, transcended? In the direction of what Levinas calls Goodness or absolute responsibility. This absolute responsibility is what makes indifference impossible to the question of the third that asks to justify the place that identity has in the world. In the last analysis absolute responsibility is what makes the beginning of the tale with which the identity justifies itself unjustifiable. It is consequently what links recognition as forgiveness and recognition as excuse. The beginning of the tale of identity is unjustifiable because interiority did not choose absolute responsibility. Interiority is exposed, says Levinas, to absolute responsibility and such exposition is beyond remedy. Absolute responsibility that identity finds at the origin of itself refuses every justification because identity cannot assume and choose absolute responsibility.

Therefore the other in the relation of the *entre nous* and the Third—that are the other that makes forgiveness possible and the other for which forgiveness is no longer possible—are not two alternative figures, but rather the same figure, and this means that not only is thinking together recognition as forgiveness that founds the intersubjective relation and recognition as excuse that founds the social relation possible but it is also necessary. So in Levinas not only do we find the distinction between these two kinds of recognition, as in Hegel, but also the necessity of their connection, because without this connection recognition contradicts itself.

The tale of my identity that justifies my place in the world, with which I ask to be recognised, originates in the face of the other that asks me to justify myself. This means that my tale, the tale through which I constitute my identity, recognise my identity and ask for recognition, does not include its origin, its justification within itself. For this reason it can be forgiven, and so it is open to a relation with the other that is not only the ratification of a position that can be justified, but also a constitutive relation, unforeseen, that is to say, an event, a gift, original recognition.

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Thus to find the originally present in which the tale of identity begins, means to find the connection between recognition as forgiveness and recognition as excuse, that is to say, to find the connection between intersubjectivity and sociality. Closure in the totality, in Being without the possibility of evasion is for Levinas closure in our own roles inside History or inside a socio-political community, that is, closure in our own character.

According to Levinas, this closure is due to the oblivion of recognition as forgiveness at the origin of identity. Once forgiveness is forgotten, recognition becomes an excuse, identification, fixation in a role, and impossibility of the intersubjective relation.

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