

Philosophy in Review

BOOK REVIEW

Michael Sohn. *The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics and Religion in the Thought of Levinas and Ricoeur.* Baylor University Press 2014.

PHILOSOPHY IN REVIEW

Vol. 35, No. 1 | FEBRUARY 2015

URL: <http://www.uvic.ca/pir>

COPYRIGHT © Scott Davidson 2015

UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA

Michael Sohn. *The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics and Religion in the Thought of Levinas and Ricoeur.* Baylor University Press 2014. 172 pp. \$69.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781481300629).

Michael Sohn's *The Good of Recognition* calls attention to important areas of intersection between the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur received his initial introduction into phenomenology through Levinas's 1930 book on Husserl, and Levinas's own original work came to play a significant role in the development of Ricoeur's later thought. Levinas, in turn, received his first professorship through Ricoeur. And even though Ricoeur's work is rarely cited by Levinas, Sohn does good detective work to show that Levinas was indeed familiar with it and held it in high esteem (17). Throughout, this book is noteworthy for its clarity, precision, and accuracy.

The Good of Recognition has a simple and straightforward architecture. Chapter One, 'Situating the Concept of Recognition', situates Levinas and Ricoeur within the context of the French intellectual milieu that would give rise to their original thought. This chapter is a good example of what Sohn does best. As a historian of ideas, he provides an overview of the French reception of Hegel, led by Jean Wahl and Alexandre Kojève in the 1920s and 30s and later by Alexandre Koyré and Jean Hyppolite. Yet Sohn does not minimize Husserl's influence on the two thinkers, either. Instead, he suggests that the French reading of Hegel's phenomenology influences the French reception of Husserl's phenomenology, leading them to see it as a passage to the concrete dimension of actual, lived experience. In spite of their similar philosophical influences (as documented in Chapters Two and Four), Levinas and Ricoeur are inspired by very different religious traditions (as documented in Chapters Three and Five).

Chapter Two, 'Emmanuel Levinas: Recognition as Pure Sensation', aims 'to highlight the centrality of the concept of recognition in Levinas's philosophy by situating it within the intellectual context of the day, tracing the development of his understanding of the concept, and reconstructing the different uses and dimensions of the term' (21). To accomplish this task, Sohn rehearses Levinas's critique of Husserlian phenomenology, his account of the idea of the Infinite, and his understanding of the relation between ethics and politics. While these are indeed central themes in Levinas's philosophy, it is highly unusual to associate them with the notion of recognition. Sohn often uses this term where most Levinas scholars (and Levinas himself) would speak of ethical responsibility. Examples of this include his description of Levinas's book on Husserl as a 'Critique of the Meaning of Recognition', even though the focus of that book is on cognition and the nature of being rather than on recognition. The same goes for Sohn's description of the idea of the Infinite in terms of ethical recognition, although Levinas usually ties this simply to the face to face relationship or ethics. My point here is simply that the chapter needs to be much more up front and clearly justify this particular way of presenting Levinas's philosophy.

Chapter 3, 'Emmanuel Levinas: A Jewish Perspective on Recognition', suggests that Levinas's phenomenology of recognition can be 'interpreted in specifically Jewish terms . . .' (41) and thus goes on to situate his thought 'in the thick of the theological controversies of his day regarding the proper nature and task of a science of Judaism' (43). Sohn traces this back to 19th century discussions of the science of Judaism. Whereas this movement tended to separate the science of Judaism from the rich sources of the rabbinic tradition, what Levinas wants to do in his Jewish writings is to revive the rabbinic tradition as a means for understanding the present. This 'new science of Judaism', according to Sohn, can be inscribed into Levinas's account of the ethical. Here the

basic terms of Levinas's description of the ethical, such as passivity, asymmetry, and the non-voluntary, become cloaked with religious concepts such as election, kerygma, and prophecy. In this way, they come to express not only a universal feature of ethical responsibility but also the distinctive and particular perspective of Judaism.

Chapter 4, 'Paul Ricoeur: Recognition as Pure and Empirical Will', provides a very detailed and insightful discussion of recognition as a theme in Ricoeur's early work (73-82). Sohn first identifies this theme in Ricoeur's work on Jaspers, through Jaspers's notion of the 'loving struggle for existence' (71). Sohn goes on to suggest that the theme of recognition is also present in Ricoeur's early works such as *Freedom and Nature* and *Fallible Man*. What this does is to remind scholars that, instead of being a new development in his thought, Ricoeur's *Course of Recognition* is in fact a return to a theme from his earlier work. But what is disappointing about this chapter is that Sohn's treatment of Ricoeur's later work remains rather cursory and provides only a general overview of Ricoeur's account of recognition (84-90). Given the title of the book, this is precisely where the reader would have expected to find the greatest level of detailed textual analysis and development of Ricoeur's 'incomplete work'. The chapter thus begins well but ends up feeling incomplete.

Chapter 5, 'A Christian Perspective on Recognition', acknowledges that Ricoeur never addresses the theme of recognition in his religious writings (96) and does not use those writings to provide insight into recognition either. As a result, it is hard to see its specific role within the overall design of the book. That said, this chapter does have much to offer as a matter of general interest. It situates Ricoeur's thought within some of the important debates in Christian theology in an informed and insightful way that will surely benefit anyone with an interest in Ricoeur's religious thought.

Chapter 6 concludes with a series of reflections on the theme of recognition in the context of phenomenology, ethics, politics, and religion, respectively. This chapter, on the whole, is disappointing, given all of the work that is done to set up the problem of recognition. While this would be the appropriate place for a systematic approach to the problem of recognition that goes beyond what either Levinas or Ricoeur offer and that sheds new light on the current status of the debate, the chapter turns out to be mostly a summary and comparison of the main ideas presented in previous chapters. The only other recognition theorist mentioned here is Axel Honneth and the treatment of Honneth is rather thin (128-130). This results in a significant gap in the book between what is promised and what is delivered with regard to recognition.

While it is undeniable that there are important intersections between Levinas and Ricoeur to be explored around the themes listed in the book's subtitle (namely, Phenomenology, Ethics and Religion), I am not convinced that there is an equal significance to be found in the theme of recognition. Such a connection depends on a very unusual way of reading Levinas. In fact, Sohn often invokes this term where most Levinas scholars (and often Levinas himself) would speak of the face or ethical responsibility. This shift in terminology stands in need of justification, especially insofar as the Hegelian notion of mutual recognition would seem to downplay and diminish the asymmetry that characterizes ethical responsibility in the Levinasian sense. Following Hegel, one would ordinarily understand mutual recognition as a relationship that is based on freedom and equality between oneself and another, but Levinasian ethics is characterized precisely by the fact that it signifies a relationship with the other that is prior to my initiative and that is based on an asymmetry between myself and the other. This makes the identification of Levinas with the theme of recognition much more problematic than Sohn ever suggests.

An alternate approach might be to acknowledge this difference by aligning the Hegelian notion of mutual recognition with the political in Levinas, which is the place of symmetry, calculation and comparison between others. To do so would be to indicate that the source of the demand for recognition, as Levinas construes it, comes from a prior absolute ethical responsibility and, consequently, that the work of political recognition remains limited in the sense that it can never do enough to exhaust this ethical responsibility. Such an approach might then yield a more vigorous debate with Ricoeur's conception of recognition, inasmuch as Ricoeur seems to be more optimistic about the prospects of recognition.

Overall, *The Good of Recognition* provides an excellent introduction for any reader who is approaching Levinas or Ricoeur for the first time as well as for those who are already familiar with their work but seek to understand it more deeply. Yet it is likely to disappoint readers who are coming to this book in search of deeper insights into the contemporary debate over the theme of recognition.

Scott Davidson, Oklahoma City University