

Becoming Capable, Being Recognized

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The prize with which you honour me, and for which I thank the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress most sincerely, has been awarded for the humanism the generous bestowers of the prize find in my life's work. The thoughts that follow are devoted to examining some of the foundations of that humanism.

My title has two parts to it: it refers, on the one hand, to the capacities human agents attribute to themselves and, on the other, to the recourse we make to others to give that personal certainty a social status. The issue common to both poles of this duality is personal identity. I identify myself by my capacities, by what I can do. The individual refers to him- or herself as a capable person, but adds also... a suffering one, in order to underscore the vulnerability of the human condition.

Capacities may be observed from outside, but, fundamentally, they are felt, experienced in the mode of certainty. This latter is not a belief, in the sense of something regarded as an inferior level of knowledge. It is a confident assurance, akin to testimony. I am speaking here of attestation, which is to the self as the testimony we bear is to an event, encounter or accident.

Phenomenology of the Capable Man

It is possible to draw up a typology of basic capacities at the point where innate and acquired characteristics intersect. These fundamental powers constitute the primary base of humanity, in the basic sense of human-ness. At the human level, change, which is an aspect of identity (of ideas and things), takes on a

dramatic aspect, which is that of personal history, entangled with the countless histories of our companions in existence. Personal identity is characterized by a temporality that may be described as constitutive. Persons are their histories. In the outline typology I propose, I examine in turn the capacity to say, the capacity to act and the capacity to narrate, to which I add imputability and the act of promising. In this broad overview of the capacities asserted and exercised by the human agent, the main emphasis shifts from a pole that is, at first sight, morally neutral, to an explicitly moral pole, where the capable subject attests him or herself to be a responsible subject.

A few words on each of these capacities: by “being able to say”, I mean a capacity more specific than the general gift of language that expresses itself in the plurality of languages, each with its morphology, lexicon, syntax and rhetoric. To be able to say is to produce meaningful discourse spontaneously. In discourse someone says something to someone in accordance with shared rules. “Saying something” is the meaning; “about something” is the reference to the extra-linguistic; “to someone” is the address, the basis of conversation. By “being able to act”, I mean the capacity to produce events in society and nature. This intervention transforms the notion of events, which are not simply what happens. It introduces human contingency, uncertainty and unpredictability into the course of things.

“Being able to narrate” occupies a pre-eminent place among the capacities, insofar as events of whatever origin become legible and intelligible only when recounted in stories; the age-old art of story-telling, when applied to oneself, produces life narratives which the historians articulate as history. Emplotment marks a bifurcation in identity itself – which is no longer merely the identity of the same – and in one’s own identity, which incorporates change as *peripeteia*. One may speak, consequently, of a narrative identity: the identity of the narrative plot that remains unfinished and open to the possibility of being told differently or of letting itself be told by others.

Imputability constitutes a clearly moral capacity. Human agents are regarded as the true authors of their acts, regardless of the force of the organic or physical causes. This imputability, accepted by the agent, makes him responsible, capable of ascribing to himself some of the consequences of action; where harm done to others is concerned, it underlies the possibility of reparation and final sanction.

It is on this basis that promising is possible: subjects commit themselves by giving their word and say they will do tomorrow what they pledge today. The promise limits the unpredictability of the future – at the risk of betrayal. Subjects may keep their promises or break them. In this way, they make a pledge additional to the original promise: the pledge that they will keep their word, that they will be dependable.

The Demand for Recognition

At first sight, these basic capacities do not imply any demand for recognition by others: the certainty of being able is, it must be said, a private certainty. Each, however, calls forth a partner or counterpart [un vis-à-vis]: discourse is addressed to someone capable of replying, questioning, entering into conversation and dialogue. Action is carried out with other agents, who can help or hinder; the narrative brings together multiple protagonists in a single plot; a life-story is made up of a multitude of other life-stories; as for imputability, which is often called into being by accusation, it makes me responsible before others; more narrowly, it makes the powerful responsible for the weak and the vulnerable. Lastly, the promise calls for a witness who receives and registers it; furthermore, its purpose is the good of another, unless it is aimed at wrongdoing or at exacting vengeance. However, what is lacking in these involvements of others in the private certainty of “being able” is reciprocity and mutuality, which alone make it possible for us to speak of recognition in the strong sense.

This mutuality is not given spontaneously; that is why it is demanded; and that demand is not without conflict and struggle. The idea of struggle for recognition is at the heart of modern social relations. The myth of the state of nature grants the role of foundation and origin to competition, mistrust and the arrogant affirmation of solitary glory. In that war of each against all, the fear of violent death is said to prevail. This pessimism regarding the content of human nature goes together with a lauding of the absolute power of a sovereign who stands outside the pact of submission entered into by citizens now delivered from fear. In this way, denial of recognition is inscribed in the institution. An initial recourse to reciprocity can be found in the character – equally as primal as the war of each against all – of a Natural Right [droit naturel] in which equal respect is granted to all parties to the social compact; in that conception the moral character of the social bond is thus regarded as irreducible.

What Natural Right leaves out of account is the place of struggle in the achievement of equality and justice, and the role of negative behaviours in the motivation of struggles: lack of consideration, humiliation and contempt, not to mention violence in all its – physical and psychical – forms.

The struggle for recognition is carried on at several levels. It begins at the level of affective relations linked to the transmission of life, to sexuality and to filiation. It is at its height at the point of intersection between the vertical relations of a genealogy and the horizontal relations of conjugality that have the family as their frame.

This struggle for recognition continues at the juridical level of civil rights, which centre on the ideas of liberty, justice and solidarity. Rights cannot be claimed for me that are not granted to others on an equal basis. This extension of individual capacities belonging to the juridical person relates not only to the enumeration of civil rights, but to the sphere of application of those rights to new categories of individuals and powers previously regarded with contempt. That extension is the occasion of conflicts stemming from forms of

exclusion connected with social inequalities, and also from forms of discrimination inherited from the past and still affecting various minorities.

But contempt and humiliation affect the social bond at a level that goes beyond that of rights; we are speaking now of social esteem, which concerns questions of personal value and the capacity to pursue happiness according to one's conception of the good life. This struggle for esteem takes place within the various spheres of life; at work, for example, in the struggle to achieve and protect one's rank in the hierarchy of authority; in access to housing, relations in the neighbourhood and locality, and the many encounters that make up daily life. It is always personal capacities that demand to be recognized by others.

Exchange and the Bond

The question then arises whether the social bond is constituted only in the struggle for recognition, or whether there is not also at its origin a kind of goodwill linked to the similarity between one human being and another in the great human family.

We have a hint of this in the dissatisfaction the practice of struggle induces in us. The demand for recognition expressed in that struggle is insatiable: when shall we have sufficient recognition? There is a kind of bad infinity in this quest. Yet it is also a fact that we have experiences of effective recognition in a peaceable mode. The model for this is the practice of ceremonial gift-exchange in archaic societies. This ritualized exchange is not the same as the commodity exchange that consists in buying and selling on the basis of a contract. The logic of gift exchange is a logic of reciprocity that creates mutuality; it consists in the appeal to "return the gift" that is contained in the act of giving.

Where does this obligation come from? Some sociologists have sought within the object exchanged a magical force that sends the gift around and returns it to its starting point. I prefer to follow those who see gift exchange as

an unconscious recognition of one person by another symbolized in the thing exchanged, which becomes the token of that recognition. This indirect recognition might be seen as the peaceful counterpart to the struggle for recognition. Expressed in it would be the mutuality of the social bond. Not that the obligation to make a gift in return creates a dependence on the part of the receiver to the giver, but the act of giving might be seen as an invitation to a similar generosity. This chain of generosity is the model for an effective experience of recognition without struggle that finds expression in all the truces in our struggles, and, particularly, in those armistices that are the compromises arrived at by negotiation between the social partners.

Besides this practice of compromise, the formation of the political bond that makes us citizens of a historical community proceeds not only perhaps from the concern for security and the defence of the particular interests of that community, but from something like an essentially peaceful “political friendship”. A more visible trace of the ceremonial exchange of gifts remains in the practices of generosity that run alongside commodity exchange in our society. Gift-giving remains a widespread act that escapes the objection of self-interested calculation: it is for the receiver of the gift to respond to the donor by a similar generosity. This disinterestedness finds its public expression in festivity, in family gatherings and celebrations with friends. The festive sphere in general is heir in our market societies to the gift-giving ceremony. It interrupts the market and tempers its harshness by introducing its peace into it. This intertwining of struggle and festivity is perhaps the mark of an absolutely primal relationship at the source of the social bond between the mistrust inherent in the war of each against all and the goodwill that arises from the encounter with the other, with my fellow human being.

*Text written for the reception of the Kluge Prize, awarded to Paul Ricoeur in

2005 at the Library of Congress, Washington, USA.

Revue des revues de l'adpf, sélection de décembre 2005

• Paul RICŒUR : « Devenir capable, être reconnu »
article publié initialement dans la revue *Esprit*, n°7, juillet 2005.

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