Recognition in Feuerbach

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Abstract

Ludwig Feuerbach is famous for his critical hermeneutics of religion. At the heart of it lie arguments of philosophical anthropology that directly anticipate contemporary developments in the theory of recognition. He counts amongst the great philosophers who, immediately following Kant, emphasised the constitutive importance for human beings of interpersonal and social relations. Indeed, his theory of intersubjectivity contains features that are highly original, notably the link between individual and community, and between recognition and recollection.

Keywords

Hegel · Universal and particular · I and Thou · Love · Recollection

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1 Introduction: Recognition as a Feature of the particular's Relation to the Universal

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) can be considered one of the most important intellectual ancestors of the contemporary theory of recognition. Today he is remembered especially for his critical hermeneutics of religious belief and theology. However, his critique of religion is based on a rich philosophical anthropology that provides one of the most sophisticated early accounts of the constitutive role of intersubjective and social relations for human beings. This was recognised by Axel Honneth and Hans Joas in their early book studying the intersubjective tradition in social theory (Joas and Honneth 1988). The paradox is that even though Feuerbach was a follower of Hegel, and remained deeply indebted to him even after his break with absolute idealism, his theory of recognition was developed independently of Hegel's explicit articulation of the conceptual scheme in the Jena lectures and in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The conceptual scheme Feuerbach mobilised, like many other post-Hegelian thinkers, was the idea that the specificity of human individuals lies in their capacity to relate to their species in internal ways, or, in more formal terms, in how the particular is linked to the universal. This internal link is most obvious in the case of thinking. Universal rational rules and categories allow individuals to both think for themselves, as particular individuals, and simultaneously to share thoughts with all other rational beings by thinking the same rational content. A key idea developed by Feuerbach, which formed the basis for his mature thinking, was that the unity of the particular and the universal within the singular human individual applied to other forms of human intentionality as well, notably in the sensuous encounters with others and with the world. In all such cases, there is a "unity of personhood and essence" (Feuerbach 1980, 29). There are three major ways of articulating this unity of the universal and the particular within the single individual being. Feuerbach explored each one of them, and they each became aspects of his original theory of recognition.

2 Three Modalities of the Particular-Universal Dialectic

The first articulation of the unity of particular and universal can be understood in an "intensive" way. This is the idea that a human individual can sense her own limitations as a finite being because in the very exercise of her capacities she can sense how those limits could in fact be overcome and perfection realised. What I cannot achieve on my own (in terms of knowledge, or in productive or indeed moral action), humanity as a whole can, or in the future will be able to. In this sense, the individual recognises herself as part of a greater whole that represents her better self inasmuch as it fleshes out perfections the individual can aspire to.

The universal/particular relationship also has an extensive sense, as the individual refers her own finitude not just to the set of attributes inherent in the human species, but also to the actual set of all human beings, both in the present and indeed through the generations in the past and the future. In whatever I achieve or indeed fail to

achieve by myself, I always "stand on the shoulders" of others. And as the case may be, I might contribute my own limited achievements to all the other real others who are like me, *qua* human. Here, the individual recognises herself as one amongst a community of equals.

Finally, I relate to other human beings as beings who complete me, via the encounters with real, individual others, who embody in their singular presence the others to whom I essentially relate. This is the more usual sense of recognition, as inter-personal acknowledgement. As the *Essence of Christianity* puts it, "the human being is for herself at once I and Thou: the human being can put herself in the place of another precisely because her species, her essential nature, and not merely her individuality, is an object for her" (Feuerbach 1989, 2, translation J.-P. D.). Or to quote a longer passage: "The other is my thou, – the relation being reciprocal,- my alter ego (*mein Anderes Ich*), the human being objective to me, the revelation of my own internal self. In an other I first have the consciousness of humanity; through her I make the experience, I sense that I am a human being; through the love I feel for her, it becomes clear to me that this being belongs to me and I to him, that we cannot be without each other, that only community (*Gemeinsamkeit*) constitutes humanity" (Feuerbach 1989, 158).

This passage captures many of the strands that Feuerbach developed further, and that make up the content of his "theory of recognition".

3 Feuerbach's Anticipations of Later Theories of Recognition

First, Feuerbach made observations that were confirmed by developmental psychology in the next century, by interpreting the I/Thou/Species relationship in dynamic terms. This is the idea that recognition of the other and by the other is a structural condition for the constitution of selfhood, both for full self-consciousness and regarding the particular structure of the self's psychological make-up. More specifically, Feuerbach emphasised the ontogenetic centrality of primary attachments between mother and child, as for example in this early passage: "only when the mother becomes the object of attention and therefore the object of love, only then does the distinction between subject and object arise" (Feuerbach 1980, 41). Some of the passages in that book directly anticipate the social psychology of George Herbert Mead, which was at the core of Honneth's first model of recognition.

Feuerbach also argued, as Honneth would in his 2005 Tanner lectures on reification (Honneth 2008), that the I/Thou relationship was the constitutive condition for the subject establishing relationships to the world, including cognitive ones. In other words, that recognition is the condition of cognition: "the other human being is the bond between me and the world. I am, and I feel myself, dependent on the world because if first feel myself dependent on other human beings. I reconcile and become friends with the world only through the other human being (. . .) The consciousness of the world is mediated for the I through consciousness of the Thou" (Feuerbach 1989, 83).

The normative implication of such a deeply intersubjectivistic vision is that the individual human being flourishes only if the relationships to others, which are the conditions for the full realisation of his essential capacities, are themselves flourishing. In other words, autonomy and personal fulfilment depend upon the quality of recognition relations: "the essence of man is contained only in the community and unity of man with man; it is a unity, however, which rests only on the reality of the distinction between I and thou" (Feuerbach 1986, 71). Feuerbach can thus be seen as a founding figure for contemporary philosophies linking recognition with solidarity.

4 Original Features of Feuerbach's Theory of Recognition

Feuerbach was not interested in outlining in detail the legal or the political dimensions of recognition relations. Instead, he is famous for his insistence on their affective dimension, which he captures under the term "love". "Love" for Feuerbach is not restricted to what is the first "sphere" of recognition in Honneth's initial model, namely the intimate relationships with significant others. Rather, Feuerbach's concept identifies the core affect that carries genuine interactions with other human beings, when I recognise them as my "Thous", and I position myself as the Thou of those other "Is". However, even though his concept of love is therefore very broad, and indeed is sometimes interpreted by him as akin to friendship, he usually takes sexual love as the paradigmatic example, or the most powerful instantiation, of that core affect.

An original feature of Feuerbach's theory of recognition is the link he established between recognition and recollection. The dependence of the self upon recognition relations is structural, in other words recognition remains a condition of selfhood throughout the subject's life. Feuerbach emphasised this temporal aspect of recognition and described it as a process of recollection. He argued that the permanence of the subject across time relies upon processes of recollection which are not just internal, based on personal memories, but also intersubjective processes. As I receive confirmation of my personhood through the recollections of me by others, my personal self becomes a public self. And since it applies equally to all individuals, the process once again establishes a dialectic of the particular and the universal. Recognition thus involves practices of individual and public remembrance, which sustain the individualisation of selves and the bridging of their particularity, strengthening communal bonds,: "Your entire life is a process of being recollected; everything in you and you yourself pass away; and with this passing away you become an object of recollection. But recollection itself is nothing but a continuous process of spiritualisation, for in recollection your being becomes essentialised and universalised. . .. your life, as a continuing process of recollection and spiritualisation, is the uninterrupted process of cancelling the boundary between you and others and therefore of cancelling your personal being and with it your personhood" (Feuerbach 1980, 118–121).

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