Recognition and Acknowledgement

IASR LECTURE 29.9.2015
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@IASR: Moral vs. social philosophy
@CoE Reason and Religious Recognition: THIS!
Part 1: Introduction
Why the theme?

- Recognition both a perennial and an urgent theme!
- Conceptually, it’s been studied for more than 200 years
- Empirically, relations of recognition more urgent day by day...
- e.g. recognizing the rights of minorities; say, of religious groups, or in particular, of ethnic groups (cf. the notion of toleration)
- Today, we move from recognition to acknowledgement (to be defined as we go on!), in order to understand ethical relationships
What are we doing today?

**MY METHOD**
- Conceptual analysis
- Close reading of contemporary philosophical texts
- Rational reconstruction of their interlinking themes, juxtaposition with one another

**MY SOURCES**
- A well-known Finnish theorist of recognition, Arto Laitinen
- A lesser-known American philosopher of acknowledgement Stanley Cavell
- Appealing to empirical instances of social recognition to test the claims
What is Recognition?

R0: B seeks recognition from A,
R1: A grants recognition to B,
R1def: A defines “as what” B is recognized
R: B recognizes A.

➢ BUT... Do we need R1def?
➢ i.e. Can we recognize someone (or something) without dictating/determining what is being recognized?
What are we getting at?

- In other words: Is there such a thing as nonconceptual recognition?
- If there is, this will have implications for both face-to-face morality and social policy (to do with e.g. recognizing minorities)
- IN LITERATURE Acknowledgement (ACK) often considered a rudimentary form of recognition (REC)
- Yet, it’s a **precondition** for it – underlying virtually all moral relationships
- Before REC.ing B as X, A encounters B; this is crucial in ACK!
Acknowledgement vis-à-vis Recognition

- OED: 1 “acceptance of the truth or existence of something: 2 recognition of the importance or quality of something, [e.g.] the action of showing that one has noticed someone or something”
- REC paradigmatically of persons, ACK also e.g. of normative entities *(or smth else!)*
- ACK can be unilateral, REC typically reciprocal
- In other words, ACK need not be of persons *per se*, as it were
- To grasp this, let’s look at the grammar of ‘acknowledgement’…
The grammar of REC and ACK:
Does it make sense to say the following:

- I recognize your suffering.
- I recognize the existence of the world.
- I recognize God’s withdrawal from me.

- I acknowledge your suffering.
- I acknowledge the existence of the world.
- I acknowledge God’s withdrawal from me.

NOTE: There is not some X that we recognize as the world’s existence (cf. REC)…
The grammar of REC and ACK: Does it make sense to say the following:

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Part 2: Acknowledgement in moral and social philosophy
A preface: Stanley Cavell (b. 1926)

- Philosopher at Harvard University
- Roots in ordinary language philosophy, and in particular, its moral implications
- Work in social philosophy under discussed
# Varieties of acknowledgement

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**ETHICAL**

**ONTOLoGICAL**

**EPISTEMIC**
1a. Acknowledgement of general values and principles

- The early modern understanding of acknowledgement by e.g. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke
- E.g. acknowledging equality (Hobbes) or our obligations to natural law (Locke)
- No coercion such that these must be acknowledged—but if they are acknowledged, they come into being
- Thus, acknowledgement presupposes personal autonomy
- AND: it’s a normative matter insofar as we’re acknowledging values
1b. Acknowledgement as personal responsiveness (exercise in close reading)

from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I’m late [whereas] from my knowing I am late, it does not follow that I acknowledge I’m late—otherwise, human relationships would be altogether other than they are

- ACKNOWLEDGEMENT >> KNOWLEDGE, but not vice versa!
- acknowledging implies apology, while knowledge does not
- i.e., acknowledging calls for a subjective response; the person in question will need to do something about the object of his ACK.
- Acknowledgement & accountability & personal relationships!
What is responsiveness?

IN THEORY: Laitinen, 2010, p. 323–324

Let me add a comment about “responsiveness.” I will assume that it is the normative features of the other that directly call for or require responses.

the other’s “normatively or evaluatively significant features” do not just generate reasons to respond, but rather may make us respond directly

FOR EXAMPLE: Cavell 1969, p. 263)

But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I know ... that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must acknowledge it, otherwise I do not know what “(your or his) being in pain” means ... [So] when I say that “We must acknowledge another’s suffering, ... I do not mean that we always in fact have sympathy, nor that we always ought to have it.
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Acknowledging another’s pain

(ACK1a) I acknowledge your suffering.

- Not a matter of an epistemic stance but of responding to the personhood – or in this case, to the state – of an other
- Crucial to abstain from pretending that we know the pain’s content
- To know you are in pain is to acknowledge it, or to withhold the acknowledgement. —I know your pain the way you do. (Cavell, 1969, 266; emphasis added.)
- So we come at nonconceptuality: we attend emotionally (with empathy) to something whose precise content we do not know
Part 3: From Acknowledgement to Toleration
Taking stock of what we’ve said

- The original question: Can we recognize someone (or something) without dictating/determining what is being recognized?
- My hypothesis 1: Acknowledgement, interpreted with help from Cavell and Laitinen, amounts to such a variety of nonconceptual recognition
- My hypothesis 2: Given that recognition is crucial for moral relationships, this stripe of acknowledgement sheds light on human relationships as well
- And since acknowledgement is not confined to acknowledging persons, it will arguably have implications for social philosophy as well...
What does nonconceptual acknowledgement mean?
acknowledgement does not have prescriptive content,
(grammatically speaking), it is neither a positive nor a
negative attitude toward others
but rather, as it were, a meta-term through help of which we
can analyze our relationships and respective behaviors
toward one another
Cf. what Heidegger terms an existentiale: “moods” or
“attitudes” through which we always already filter the world
around us...
There is no such a thing as an ethically neutral variety of acknowledgement; even a non-response to the presence of others is a response.

Its ethical weight as high as of Levinasian responsibility toward an Other.

Some persons sometimes are capable of certain blindnesses or deafnesses toward others; but, for example, avoidance of the presence of others is not blindness or deafness to their claim upon us; it is as conclusive an acknowledgement that they are present as murdering them would be. (Cavell, 1987, p. 103.)
Recent immigrants arriving in Finland from Iraq = B
We, the Finnish ordinary folks who receive them = A

RECOGNITION

>> as what?
R1def: A defines "as what" B is recognized

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS?
REFUGEES?
"SURFING FOR BETTER STANDARDS OF LIVING"

"refugees, beggars, asylum seekers and other foreigners" (Aamulehti 27.9.2015)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

WE DON’T KNOW YET AND OUGHT TO ABSTAIN FROM MAKING (NORMATIVE) JUDGMENTS ON THEIR TO-BE STATUS

HUMAN BEINGS
Back to the light!

- What can we learn from what I have said?
- Can the notion of acknowledgement we’ve developed be applied to groups of people?
- How would the arguments relate to the ideal of toleration?
WAIT... TOLERANCE OR TOLERATION?

- With acknowledgement, we don’t know whether we like or dislike something before we have to acknowledge it...
- Hence, toleration instead of tolerance
- With refugees, for instance, we shouldn’t base our arguments for or against their arrival on what we know about them
Acknowledgement and toleration: Some suggestions for an analogy

The notion of toleration (cf. suvaîtrevaisuus) runs parallel to the notion of acknowledgement defended today in four respects:

1. It’s nothing like a fixed point on a scale between, say, racism and antiracism.
2. It’s not something you can either show or not show.
3. It’s something we always already show toward one another.
4. Even a failure to show it is a stripe of acknowledgement/toleration.
BUT does the racist fail in a) acknowledging or b) tolerating ethnic minorities?

We can’t fail in acknowledging everybody we meet (or walk by), but we can fail in tolerating (i.e. allowing the existence without interfering) them.

It’s not that you always have to be tolerant; it’s that you can’t escape the responsibility of standing in some kind of moral relationships to all persons.
Conclusions

- Acknowledgement implies apology; it requires genuine empathy, ability to feel sorry for another.
- If we take Cavell’s (Levinasian) ethics seriously, then even an allegedly neutral response to the presence of others is an ethical failure.
- Conversely, we should seek to acknowledge all people coming in contact with us, regardless of their background.
- Further relevant dimensions of acknowledgement pertaining to moral and social philosophy remain yet to be probed...
Thank you.