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# WHAT MAKES HELP HELPFUL? SOME THOUGHTS ON ETHICS OF SOLIDARITY THROUGH GEORGE ORWELL'S WRITINGS

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**Abstract:** Organisations that offer personal services, whether this be a law firm or a hospital, may be extremely good at offering technical solutions to people, but when it comes to offering recognition, this is much more of a challenge. These institutions often lack the ability to ‘be respectful of each individual’.

Recognition is a central topic –often overseen– in the works of George Orwell, the English journalist and writer who, after taking part in the colonial system for five years, decided to ‘expiate his guilt’ by consecutively becoming homeless, taking part in agricultural labor, writing on the living conditions of the English working class and fighting as a militiaman in the Republican side during the Spanish Civil War. It was a process that spanned over several years, in which a well-educated, intellectually brilliant person, confronted and interacted with people of different countries and social backgrounds. The paper examines both failed and successful recognition experiences in Orwell’s life and work, hoping to draw some insights in how recognition works in practice.

The analysis reveals two dramatic points and leads to a pessimistic conclusion: the first point, already presented in the first part of the article, is

that without recognition, no act of help will be really helpful. And secondly, real recognition only takes place between individuals. Which leads the author to conclude, confirming the initial suggestion of the paper, that full help cannot be given by any standardized procedure, and depends almost exclusively on the ability, commitment and willingness of individuals.

**Keywords:** Ethics of solidarity, Ethics of caregiving, George Orwell, Humanism

## 1. 'BEING RESPECTFUL OF EACH INDIVIDUAL'

According to Román (2010: 122) standardized procedures and respect for the individual are natural enemies. Discussing ethics of caregiving, Román expressed this in the most explicit way: 'depersonalisation takes place when the relationship [between patient and caregiver] is standardised for the smoothing running [sic] of the centre'. A centre that prioritizes its own procedures (and which centre does not?) will, willy-nilly, stop seeing the help-receiver as an individual. But Román was writing about caregiving to mentally disabled people: communication issues could be called upon (in a somewhat patronizing way) if one had to justify the inadequacy of the centre's policy.

And when communication is challenged, recognition is challenged too. Consider now a case in the far-away field of law practice. Failinger, discussing how lawyers should address low-income clients, had to post, among others, such a basic question like 'how can a lawyer and a client have a conversation which constitutes communication?' (1999: 2074). One is tempted to reply maliciously: "By talking to each other?" Of course, the problem runs deeper. Failinger even has to quote Levinas in order to try to figure out the problem (and one, again maliciously, wonders whether a professional, theoretical philosopher will really be helpful in this or any other practical case). Because even when it is not impaired by speech issues or bad faith, communication is always difficult. It might be of use then to examine cases in which people successfully overcome gulfs of cultural, language and class issues, and are able to achieve recognition. That is what we intend to do by reading some of Orwell's writings.

Recognition: The ability to see the other as an equal. And when recognition happens, it is painful not to treat the other the right way: the harm you do to the other is a harm you do to yourself.

Petrini (2010: 2), in discussing public health ethics, resurfaces the problem: 'Public health interventions can be ethically sound if they simultaneously meet the challenge of being respectful of each individual, not utilitarian, and practically effective'. Petrini is implying that there is, at least, a certain tension between being 'respectful of each individual', and applying the principle of utility. Recognition might not be cheap: if the utilitarian principle is not rigidly applied, things might not add up from the perspective of the economy. Both the mentality that says that benefits must be maximized, and (one may add) her twin sister, the technical mind (the 'one best way' set of mind), act against recognition. Utility cannot be the sole principle to be taken into account in public health policies, suggests Petrini. Why is that? Our claim, that we will try to validate through Orwell's writings: because without recognition, which escapes the logic of utility and the technical mind, there cannot be any effective help. And so, any professional of personal services (caregivers, policemen, lawyers, teachers, social workers, you name it) needs to keep in mind the issue of recognition if he or she is to offer truly *helpful* help, a help beyond technical problem-solving. That seems to be a common concern among those who write on ethics of solidarity, of which the above-quoted articles are just a small sample.

How important is recognition when it comes to define solidarity? In their influential report, Prainsack and Buyx (2011: 47) stated that "solidarity comprises manifestations of the willingness to carry costs to assist others with whom a person *recognizes sameness or similarity* in at least one relevant respect" (my emphasis). And although these authors stress the importance of actual help beyond internal feelings<sup>1</sup>, other authors, like Meulen (2016: 526) put recognition in the core of solidarity: 'Solidarity is the experience of recognition of one-self as a person with a particular identity in the intersubjective context of mutual recognition', suggesting that action goes in second place.

'Solidarity suggests an active commitment to our common humanity', so claimed Gallagher (2013: 500) when writing, for inspirational pur-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Prainsack, Buyx (2011), p.46: "It is important to note that solidarity is understood here as a practice and not merely as an inner sentiment or an abstract value. Solidarity requires actions. Motivations and feelings such as empathy etc. are not sufficient to satisfy this understanding of solidarity, unless they manifest themselves in acts."

poses, an editorial on the importance and mission of the nurses<sup>2</sup>. Admittedly, the way in which the claim is made does not turn out to be philosophically sophisticated: it does not compare to Levinas' subtleties. But the point is made sufficiently clear: solidarity is based on our common humanity. And therefore, all our ethics of solidarity problems revolve around the difficulties of making our common humanity felt when we try to help others: all our problems are connected to recognition.

## 2. RECOGNITION IN GEORGE ORWELL'S WORKS

Eric Arthur Blair –later known as George Orwell– was born in 1903 in India. His father was a civil servant working in the Opium Department. His mother took him and his sister back to England the following year. He had a happy childhood until 1911, when he was boarded at St. Cyprian's private preparatory school in Easbourne, Sussex. If his 'Such, such were the joys' is to be literally believed, in that school young Eric started to feel the terrors of psychological coercion, which would come handy when as an adult he started writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In 1917 he won a scholarship to the most prestigious and exclusive public school in England, Eton, where he remained until 1922. Instead of entering Oxford or Cambridge, which was the natural move after finishing the educational drill of Eton, he decided to join the Imperial Police in Burma, where he served for the next five years.

This was one of the most decisive periods of his life. Burma was socially and politically troubled by then, and the English living and working there faced a permanent and explicit hostility (See Meyers 2001: 55-57). There he learnt what it means to lose one's individuality: on the one hand, the natives would see in the English only the army of occupation they were, which reinforced the tendency of the English to act so, a point Orwell made masterfully in his narrative 'Shooting an Elephant', first published in 1936. The English had native servants and mistresses, but were not encouraged at all to have meaningful contacts with the Burmese. Although in his novel *Burmese Days* (1934), Orwell makes the main character keep a close friendship with a Dr. Ver-

<sup>2</sup> Gallagher also quoted Prainsack and Buyx's definition of solidarity, leaving aside the idea of recognition of similarity and sameness, which she substituted with references to "common humanity".

aswami –an Indian–, there were no significant contacts in Orwell's life during that period – English or native (Meyers 2001: 62). On the other hand, an atmosphere of mutual surveillance was kept among the English themselves, to the effect that no one could express his doubts or utter any criticism to the colonial system. True friendship among the English had to face this particular difficulty as well. Only years later, Orwell would dare to criticise explicitly the imperial system he had served. In the short story, 'A Hanging', published in 1931, Orwell makes the point we are interested in: the difficulty of recognition. As a police officer, Orwell could attend executions<sup>3</sup>. One of them made a permanent impression in him; not because it was especially brutal or because it went wrong from the point of view of the procedures (leaving aside a stray dog that interrupted momentarily the execution). It was just a minor detail, almost invisible, that made Orwell realise that it was a human life they were taking. On his way to the gallows, the prisoner stepped aside a little bit to avoid stepping on a puddle. Orwell (CW 10: 208)<sup>4</sup>:

'It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working — bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming — all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned — reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone — one mind less, one world less.'

Admittedly, the whole narrative leaves a strong impression of artistic re-elaboration: the quote above is the central focus of the story, so pre-

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon (1991: 103) says that he could attend voluntarily any execution he wanted. Meyers (2000: 69) claims that Orwell saw only one execution, on the grounds that Orwell once published an article where he said: 'I watched a hanged man once...' in November 1944.

<sup>4</sup> All of Orwell quotations are taken from professor Davison's edition of the Complete Works, and referenced as CW, followed by the number of the volume and of the page.

cisely set in the middle that only a very naïve reading could escape the impression of conscious literary construction. But the point is made: **procedures act against recognition, are in fact devised to avoid recognition.** Their sole purpose is smoothness and effectiveness. They are utilitarian: they serve the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is very obvious when it comes to the procedures applied in executions: as in the above given example, no execution is to be carried out if the prisoner's humanity was manifest. But one is left to wonder if our protocols in hospitals, police stations, nursing homes and the rest have the same purpose. Every now and then, though, a little, almost imperceptible detail, reveals what procedures try to hide: the existence of human beings.

As soon as Orwell got a permission to go back to England, he resigned his position and for a period of five years he became a tramp, which he did intermittently while he was in England, and almost full time while he stayed in Paris. "I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate" (...) "I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants" (CW 5: 138). His tramping expeditions ended by 1932, when back in England he started to work as a school teacher; he also started his writing career.

His first book appeared in 1933. It was called *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and deals with his experiences as a tramp (it was with this book, his first English publication, when Orwell decided to use his pen name for the first time). Again, there is a lot of artistic re-elaboration, but most of the events are biographical (See Bowker, 2004: 144). Some of its passages speak volumes on how recognition is attained (or not). In the beginning we learn that, after pawning his best suit, in exchange of which Orwell got old, almost ragged clothes, he discovered how prejudice and appearances made recognition impossible (CW 1: 130):

'My new clothes had put me instantly into a new world. Everyone's demeanour seemed to have changed abruptly. I helped a hawker pick up a barrow that he had upset. 'Thanks, mate', he said with a grin. No one had called me mate before in my life –it was the clothes that had done it. For the first time I noticed, too, how the attitude of women varies with a man's clothes. When a badly dressed man passes them they shudder away from him with a quite frank movement of disgust, as though he were a dead cat. Clothes are powerful things. Dressed in a tramp's clothes

it is very difficult, at any rate for the first day, not to feel genuinely degraded. You might feel the same shame, irrational but very real, your first night in prison.'

A man educated in Eton is reduced, consecutively, to a fellow tramp and to a dead cat. Recognition is challenged by very superficial things we take for granted, but that are, indeed, 'powerful things'.

Both procedure and prejudice work together to prevent recognition, to disastrous results even when help is intended. This is specifically made clear by a story in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Orwell explains that, after being hungry for days, and having only little money, that he meant to stretch as long as possible, he and his fellow-tramp 'Paddy' decided to go to a church where tea and six slices of bread and margarine were offered. The tramps were supposed to stay for a service that would begin immediately after the food had been delivered. Evidently, the tramps sitting near the exit door would bolt to avoid the service, but the rest, out of lack of cheekiness, stayed. The scene Orwell describes, once the service is started, is both amusing and terrifying. The tramps sitting in the gallery above would chatter out loud, would stamp their feet, would even try to light cigarettes, and some would start throwing pellets of bread to the congregation below. The pastor, at some point, felt he had to address them to call for order, with a 'I shall address the last five minutes of my sermon to the *unsaved* sinners!' (CW 1: 185), to no effect on his guilty audience. The tramps left the church as soon as the doors opened, exchanging promises of coming back the following week. Orwell reflects on the whole experience like this (*ibid.*):

"It was a queer, rather disgusting scene. Below were the handful of simple, well-meaning people, trying hard to worship; and above were the hundred men whom they had fed, deliberately making worship impossible. A ring of dirty, hairy faces grinned down from the gallery, openly jeering. What could a few women and old men do against a hundred hostile tramps? They were afraid of us, and we were frankly bullying them. *It was our revenge upon them for having humiliated us by feeding us*" (my emphasis).

Help reaches those who need it, but they feel not helped at all. Quite the contrary, they feel abused and humiliated. Orwell drives it home by claiming, tremendously:

"A man receiving charity practically always hates his benefactor –it's a fixed characteristic of human nature; and, when he has fifty or hundred others to back him, he will show it." (CW 1:186)

This reads as a pessimistic, hopeless claim on the predicament of the poor. Poverty would seem a permanent, unsurpassable mark: help is an affront. Recognition seems unattainable. However, it is Orwell himself, again resorting to his own experiences, who just a few lines below presents the reader with another case; this time he shows how it should be done:

‘At half past eight Paddy took me to the Embankment, where a clergyman was known to distribute meal tickets once a week (...). Presently the clergyman appeared and the men ranged in a queue in the order in which they had arrived. The clergyman was a nice, chubby, youngish man (...). He was shy and embarrassed, and did not speak except for a brief good evening; he simply hurried down the line of men, thrusting a ticket upon each, and not waiting to be thanked. The consequence was that, for once, there was genuine gratitude, and everyone said that the clergyman was a good — feller. Someone (in his hearing, I believe) called out: “Well, *he’ll* never be a — bishop!” – this, of course, intended as a warm compliment.’ (CW 1: 186-7)

It is easy to see the difference: the pastor in his church was not giving freely; the clergyman in the Embankment was asking for nothing in return. But recognition doesn’t seem to spring exactly from that. The key phrase here is, I think, ‘he was shy and embarrassed’. The clumsy, informal way the clergyman helped the others – he was skipping all procedures and acting almost in secrecy –, and his embarrassment, made the difference. The clergyman was abandoning a sheltered position by going to the Embankment, not only physically speaking, but rather spiritually, which is actually much more difficult. To be unsheltered is something that can’t be attained by a conscious effort, it is, almost by definition, something that happens against one’s will.

The clergyman was obviously trying to help, but also wanted to get away as soon as possible. He felt uncomfortable, a feeling he didn’t manage to hide. He had been unsheltered by paying attention to whom was receiving his help. With genuine feelings of unsuitability, shared both by the helper and the helped, recognition was attained.

Now, both examples are unacceptable from the point of view of our standards of how the poor need to be helped. They are sheer acts of charity; they offer only a temporary relief that will not contribute to improving the situation. But something unexpected happens in the second example: Helper and helped are equal. Their common humanity is felt by both, even if it is through feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment, in this case. How important is this in the field of ethics of Solidarity? Is



mutual recognition more or less important than social empowerment? More or less than finding the right treatment of a disease, for example? Recognition belongs to a different field from where material needs are met<sup>5</sup>. It belongs rather to a social part of the self, a part that is injured, or at least, endangered, in situations of necessity. That is why the need of recognition, although being universal, is more intensely felt among the poor, among those who try to help them and those who reflect on how to do it, like the above quoted articles (Román's and Feilinger's) clearly express. At the light of George Orwell's texts, the need of recognition seems to be at least as important as any other. Or even more: without recognition, help becomes an affront<sup>6</sup>.

The term recognition is probably better than the more traditional term equality. Both Orwell and Failinger would concur. Failinger, in discussing how to offer legal assistance to low-income clients, said that 'the ethics of solidarity demands that we do not totalize the other. It is built on mutuality, not on identity; we are committed to each other not because of identical interests but because of similar ones. We are fellow travelers, but not because we go down the same road together. Rather, our lives intersect at critical moments of encounter, when we are bound to each other in a moment of action whether we like it or not. Solidarity respects both bonds and distances, both continuities of terrain and vast gulfs between people, trying to imagine how to act, to work together, in a way that respects both' (Failinger 1999: 2121). Recognition, or 'solidarity' as Failinger expresses it, has to do more with mutuality than with identity.

There are, according to Failinger, distances and gulfs between the help-giver and the help-receiver that need to be respected, that is, that don't need to disappear. As much of a socialist as he was, Orwell would reach the same conclusion about preserving distances and finding ways to work together, about being just fellow travelers. When he wrote his controversial *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936), he was brave enough to

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<sup>5</sup> Meulen (2016: 528): "Health care policies and arrangements should go beyond merely meeting needs and rights by exploring how people's personal dignity and sense of belonging can be sustained within relations of recognition, reciprocity, and support".

<sup>6</sup> According to Margalit, a society that helps those in need is not necessarily a decent society (1996: 523): "If humiliating means damaging people's self-respect, it should be clear that a society that does not humiliate its members is a necessary condition for a just society". Providing for material necessities only doesn't constitute real help.

discuss the issue of social class distinctions, which was already a delicate subject at that time, a time when class distinctions were much more intensely felt than nowadays. The issue has not vanished today, though. It lies behind Failinger's quotation. What does she refer to when she mentions 'gulfs' and 'distances' between the help giver and the receiver?

She means tastes, aspirations, ways of seeing the world, and all that depends on education and, ultimately, on the class one belongs to – even if, by a democratic prejudice that aims at suppressing realities by suppressing words, we don't use the term 'class' anymore. Orwell saw it clearly (CW 5: 149-50):

'It is easy for me to say that I want to get rid of class-distinctions, but nearly everything I think and do is a result of class-distinctions. All my notions – notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful – are essentially middle-class notions (...). When I grasp this I grasp that it is no use clapping a proletarian on the back and telling him that he is as good a man as I am; if I want real contact with him, I have got to make an effort for which very likely I am unprepared.'

The effort would entail altering oneself to a point in which one would become a different person. Orwell implies that this is as difficult as unnecessary. When Orwell wrote *The Road to Wigan Pier* he had already spent a long time among tramps, and in documenting the book, he got to know the living and working conditions of the miners in northern England. Orwell knew all levels of the social hierarchy: he was a member of the middle-class by birth, that had been to Eton and to the slums. He could claim for himself – although he did not – the epistemic privilege of the marginalized together with an upper-class education. According to Orwell, one did not have to drop class distinctions, i.e., the world view of his social position, in order to work together with people of other social identities, of other class:

'If you belong to the bourgeoisie, don't be too eager to bound forward and embrace your proletarian brothers; they may not like it, and if they show that they don't like it you will probably find that your class-prejudices are not so dead as you imagined. And if you belong to the proletariat, by birth or in the sight of God, don't sneer too automatically at the Old School Tie; it covers loyalties which can be useful to you if you know how to handle them.' (CW 5: 215)

Recognition keeps distances, recognition is not identity. Recognition experiences are perfectly compatible with a full awareness of personal and social differences.

This vision was utterly confirmed, in Orwell's case, during his participation in the Spanish Civil War. Orwell arrived in Catalonia in late December 1936. According to his *Homage to Catalonia*, one of the most deeply settled memories he got from those days sprung from a fortuitous encounter with a militiaman, one day before Orwell himself joined the militia. 'Something in his face deeply moved me (...). There were both candor and ferocity in it; also the pathetic reverence illiterate people have for their supposed superiors' (Orwell 2001: 31). It was an Italian of twenty-five or twenty-six, trying hardly to understand some military information he was being given; according to Orwell, he just could not. Someone pointed Orwell to him and they briefly engaged one another in a short conversation in Spanish. When Orwell left the room afterwards, the Italian stepped across the room for a hand shake, gripping his hand very hard.

'Queer, the affection you can feel for a stranger! It was as though his spirit and mine had momentarily succeeded in bridging the gulf of language and tradition and meeting in utter intimacy. I hoped he liked me as well as I liked him'. (CW 6, 1)

Orwell was so impressed by this experience of recognition, such a powerful epiphany of the common humanity, that he even would write a poem on the experience (CW 13: 510-511). It would seem that his memories of the war were dotted, here and there, by similar experiences. Even in the middle of war action he was willing to recognize fellow-human beings among the enemy ranks. He once had the chance to shoot an enemy soldier, but he refrained from it. Republican aviation had started to fly over "Fascist" positions, and the Francoist troops were running away:

'At this moment a man, presumably carrying a message to an officer, jumped out of the trench and ran along the top of the parapet in full view. He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him (...) partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at "Fascists"; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a "Fascist", he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him'. (CW 13: 501)

Again another detail gives out common humanity, in this case, between enemies engaged in killing one another. The humanity of the "Fascist" is revealed by the fact that he was holding up his trousers with both hands, running away in a very comical way.

What refrained Orwell from shooting was, according to himself, the fact that his aim was not very good, plus the fact that the weapons the militias had been given were old and bad beyond description, and could not be trusted. And to make things worse, Orwell and his fellow militiamen had abandoned their positions, and had to make the best of the fact that the “Fascists” were running away instead of engaging fire from an unsheltered place. They simply drew back. All kinds of reasons for not firing can be called upon in such situation. Orwell chooses to point at the trousers. Like in his narrative “A Hanging”, something that should not be there, something that escapes protocol –the protocol of a war, that in the Sportsmanlike-Etonian spirit of Orwell included shooting at enemies ready to shoot at you– reveals the existence of human beings. But the story is significant because common humanity is revealed by the fact that the man was defecating when the Republican aviation forced him to move. Which means: common humanity is revealed at its best when the fact that man is slave to his necessities is forced upon the observer.

### 3. LACK OF RECOGNITION AND ITS ROOTS

Orwell, in his book on his experiences as a tramp (1933):

‘Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor, as though they were two different races, like negroes and white men. But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit. Change places, and handy dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Everyone who has mixed on equal terms with the poor knows this quite well’. (CW 1: 121)

On the one hand, man’s submission to necessity, manifested in the previous war story, leads to recognition of human fellowship. On the other hand, though, such revelation is usually rejected. Simply because no one likes to be reminded of his or her inescapable submission to necessity. To Orwell, everyone who has mixed in equal terms with the poor knows he is slave to necessity. But who has mixed in equal terms with the poor? How many have the epistemic privilege of knowing, not in a theoretical or rhetorical way, to be subject to necessity? Only from an unsheltered position, common subjection to necessity is revealed. But only a few people are willing to be unsheltered. Everyone clings fiercely

to whatever lets him carry on with the fiction of being out of necessity, from his clothes to his money and education. That is why the rich tend to see the poor as a different kind of human beings, as racists do with men of other skin colors.

After leaving Spain, and after finishing the manuscript of *Homage To Catalonia*, Orwell had a new bout of pulmonary affection. It was another of a series of episodes that had been weakening him since his childhood, and that would eventually kill him at the age of forty-six. He spent six months in a sanatorium in Kent, and the doctors recommended him to spend some months in a dry country. He and his wife found the money and they travelled to Morocco. During his six months stay in that country, he was able finish his *Coming Up For Air* (which he published in 1939), and on returning to England he wrote and published about the country they had been living in. A very special experience of recognition is consigned in his Moroccan diary:

‘Another day I was feeding the gazelles in the public gardens with bread when an Arab employee of the local authorities who was doing navvy work nearby came up to me and asked for a piece of the bread. I gave it to him and he pocketed it gratefully’. (CW 11: 209)

Although it seems to be a petty anecdote, Orwell would write about it in an extended way later on<sup>7</sup>. Orwell had not really noticed the man before he asked for bread. It seemed to him that the Arab employee was just there to take a close look at the gazelles; it was when he discovered that he was fascinated for the bread rather than for the animals that the episode became significant. Orwell would describe it to make the point that Morocco was such a poor a country that it could not even afford to pay more than starvation wages to its employees. But it is easy to see that real recognition only took place when the man in question revealed his state of necessity.

To what extent are our procedures so crafted that our common state of necessity is overlooked? Patients at hospitals are reduced to data so that the treatments are as quick and efficient as possible: doctors interact with data rather than with people. By ignoring the human essential need of recognition, by ignoring man's subjection to necessity, modern insistence on procedure (that comes from the utilitarian and the technical mind), has shaped an efficient world that has made recognition almost impossible. If I go down the street and find someone who has been a victim of vio-

<sup>7</sup> CW 11: 417 ‘Marrakech’, New Writing, New Series n.3, Christmas 1939

lence, I will not, probably, just pass by. What I will do is dial an emergency number in my cellphone and they will send the police and an ambulance. This is alright, because the victim is going to be helped.

But I will not have taken any chance with that stranger: I will not even need to interact with him. Thanks to procedure, those who help him will be able to do it without needing to acknowledge him. None of us are going to step out of a sheltered position, no one is going to be helpless in helping.

And the procedure will run smoothly as long as the patient does not act like a human being, i.e., as long as he does not reveal any idiosyncrasy, as long as he does not do any unexpected move, like the Fascist who was holding his trousers, or the prisoner who stepped aside to avoid a puddle.

What lies behind all recognition problems is the lack of Self-Recognition. After coming back from Morocco, Orwell started working at the BBC for a couple of years (from 1941 to 1943). The second world war had broken out and he saw it as a way of contributing to the war effort, as much as he hated propaganda and lamented to perspective of having less time to work on his own writings. He only managed to publish *Animal Farm* in 1945. By 1946 he started devising his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and he finished it in 1948 under extreme bad health, due to his old pulmonary issues. By the time he was finishing the typing of his manuscript, he was very ill. He spent his last year of life in two different sanatoriums. His lack of good health and the perspective of death leaked into this last novel. Of course that does not explain the book, which is rich and complex, and has basically a constructive political purpose. But for the purposes of this article we need to call attention to the fact that Orwell had to face mortality in a way not everyone does.

Our one last claim: It is the reluctance to accept our own state of need, our own mortality, that in the end explains all our difficulties with recognition.

The 'Ecce Homo' passages in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appear in the third and last section of the novel. In it, Winston Smith, the main character, has been arrested and is submitted to a long, brutal physical and psychological torture to make him abandon his beliefs of the autonomous individual, his convictions on the existence of right and wrong and even his faith in the existence of objective truth. All of these things have to be wiped out to turn him into a perfect unit of the totalitarian régime, so perfect that it doesn't allow the smallest dissention, even if it only takes places inside the skull of a solitary and ineffectual rebel.

Little by little, all of Smith's convictions are obliterated by his torturer O'Brien, the figure of a perverted Socrates, through a cruel combination of pain-infliction and pedagogical conversation. At some point, Smith claims that the sole persecution of power can't keep a régime going for long; a régime solely based on oppression will lack vitality at some point. Even if he can't find any other argument, he still holds a belief in 'The spirit of Man', a spirit inside people that would counteract the cruelties and put an end to the oppression somehow. When O'Brien asks him 'Do you consider yourself a Man?', Winston replies affirmatively. But then Smith has to admit that before his detention, he promised to act as cruelly as his oppressors –which is an attack to his own belief of being a representative of the 'spirit of man', and a reason for killing any feelings of superiority above them–, and then is given the final lesson: If he considers himself the last man for rejecting the inhuman world the totalitarians have set, he will have to take a look at his ruined physical appearance after weeks of torture and starvation:

"Look at the condition you are in!" he said. "Look at this filthy grime all over your body. Look at the dirt between your toes. Look at the disgusting running sore on your leg. Do you know that you stink like a goat? Probably you have ceased to notice it.

Look at your emaciation. Do you see? I can make my thumb and forefinger meet around your bicep. I could snap your neck like a carrot (...). Do you see that face facing you?

That is the last man. If you are a human being, that is humanity."  
(CW 9: 285)

The reflection in the mirror comes as a shock to the prisoner, and it contributes, almost definitively, to the crushing of all his beliefs. What destroys Smith at this stage of his re-education is simply the *lack of self-recognition in the face of his own naked existence*. He has lost his human appearance and that is more than enough to make him falter; his belief in Humanity doesn't pass the test of naked existence.

Orwell was counting on the readers' sympathy with Smith's predicament. And rightly so: if this particular passage is poignant –or cheaply sensational and outrageous, depending on each one's sensitivity– it is because all of us tend to resist the sight of ourselves as pure subjects to necessity. Orwell knew of this reluctance from when the time he was a tramp and had to experience how those who helped the poor were actually trying to protect themselves from them. He knew that the millionaire

who considered the poor a different breed of man was only rejecting the image of his own naked existence.

This is, I think, a deeply-settled Humanist prejudice in our culture. We tend to believe in Humanity but only to the brim of naked existence. Beyond that point, we also begin to falter. It would seem that our liberal-humanist mind is able to attribute to man all kinds of godlike capacities, which are the source of our blind faith in the economic-technological growth, but does it at the price of forgetting our subjection to necessity.

Our humanist faith in growth and technology only survives at the price of burying the *Ecce homo*, as if it was not a part of what we are. Which comes with a huge price to pay in the field of Ethics of solidarity.

#### 4. ETHICS OF SOLIDARITY

When a culture has rejected the idea of man as a subject of need, and potentially, a victim of necessity, it is no wonder it has also lost the capacity of helping those who are in need, even willing to do it, even by technically doing it. Western culture has left it all in the hands of the technical set of mind when it comes to meeting human needs; but the need for recognition cannot be met by any technological procedure. It depends on human beings caring for other human beings and discovering in them their common humanity. And even that depends on those human beings being able to acknowledge their own deep state of necessity.

Even if procedures were improved in searching for improving recognition, if some measures were taken to force the doctors, lawyers, etc., to *talk* with their clients, it would be still necessary to have professionals willing to act in an unprofessional way to allow for idiosyncrasies, unpredictable acts, delays and setbacks of all kinds which are the mark of humanity. Everything would still depend on individuals.

One thing appears to be particularly difficult: that there is a major swing in western culture, in Humanist culture, that allows the figure of the *Ecce Homo* surface and co-exist with the demi-god some Humanists consider man to be. The two images are incompatible, since the first one speaks of man as a subject of necessity, and the second one is the dream of a man liberated from necessity. Therefore, as for now, we can only count on the individual's commitment in order to make recognition more frequent, and help really helpful.



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