

Hegel and Fanon on the Question of Mutual Recognition: A Comparative Analysis

by

Charles Villet
Monash South Africa
Johannesburg, South Africa
charles.villet2@gmail.com

Abstract

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel provides his exposition of the master-slave dialectic as an account of both the emergence of self-consciousness and the need for recognition. Hegel's line of thought came to play an important role in Fanon's critique of Western colonialism. Whilst the hand of Hegel can be seen throughout Fanon's oeuvre, in a chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon pays particular interest to the specific relevance of the master-slave dialectic for colonial societies. The focus of Fanon's critique is on the role of race and violence. Violence complicates, and adds urgency, to the need for recognition. I would like to contend that an optimistic moment lurks in Fanon's work, which is articulated in a characterization of humanity which could serve as a point of entry into mutual recognition.

Introduction

Frantz Fanon's work was written in a context both similar and different to our own. We have seen an end to colonialism but its effects are still around, as is the unequal relationship between the West and its former colonies. The persistence of violence and racism in some of these former colonies in Africa means that Fanon still carries much relevance. Revisiting Fanon does not only result in a reassessment of his work but also of our own context. This paper will attempt to look at a specific passage within Fanon's work on Hegel's master-slave dialectic. The significance of this passage lies in Fanon's attempt to demonstrate why Hegel's dialectic is relevant to the colonial context. This passage is important because it provides some clues that could help us in addressing the problem of mutual recognition in light of violence and racism.

Hegel's master-slave dialectic serves as one of his most profound ideas and it has left a lasting legacy. The master-slave dialectic underscores Hegel's primary attempt at conceptualizing and describing the process of recognition on the way to mutual recognition. In short, *proper* recognition is the *mutual* recognition of one conscious agent and a second conscious agent.

Mutual recognition allows both self and the Other to have freedom and agency in the development and attainment of their own self-consciousness, in other words a cognitive awareness of the self and its relation to the Other (and also the world).¹ Hegel's master-slave dialectic describes a specific form of human relations in which domination has a central role to play. This domination is at the heart of the need for recognition in the midst of a life and death struggle. The master-slave dialectic was taken up by Fanon in his critique of Western colonialism. According to Fanon the dialectic is relevant to human relations in the colonies but he adjusts the dialectic with a focus on the role of race and violence. I agree that Fanon's version of the dialectic problematises mutual recognition but want to contend that mutual recognition still remains possible. This article sets out to articulate an optimistic moment that seems to lurk in Fanon's work where engagement with the Other (one's fellow human being), rooted in the notion of reciprocity, rests on a characterization of humanity that could possibly serve as a point of entry into mutual recognition.

Hegel's Recognition: Master and Slave

Hegel provides the master-slave dialectic in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).² This dialectic represents a fable of sorts in that it reflects Hegel's ideas on the course of history up to his time, but also the conflict contemporary to his time that existed between the French (master) and German (slave) cultures in the early nineteenth century in his native Prussia. The dialectic takes the form of an analysis of the working of self-consciousness and demonstrates how the self can only become conscious of itself by the presence of, and recognition of itself by, an-other (PhS, p. 113). However, this process of self-consciousness takes place at the expense of the Other. The moment in which the self becomes conscious of itself, declaring itself as an 'I', the Other is negated and destroyed as an-other (PhS, p. 109). This is a perplexing notion. This negation and destruction of the Other is the result of it becoming a mirror image of the self (PhS, p. 111). This mirror image is the self's attempt at overcoming the Other in order to become certain of itself as the primary and essential being in this world (PhS, p. 111). Both self and the Other engage in this process of self-consciousness and the result is an always unequal relationship of strict opposition. In short, the process is thus: declaring oneself as 'I' is a reaction to becoming conscious of one's self through the presence of an-other. Declaring oneself as 'I' is important, because it avoids consideration of the self as a *thing* (PhS, p. 115) or object amongst other objects. However, in order to do this one must see the Other as a *thing* or object, and in so doing, negate and annihilate the Other as a self that exists for itself.

To demonstrate the working of the process of self-consciousness Hegel incorporates the metaphor of the relationship between master and slave (in his vocabulary, lord and bondsman). The master "is a consciousness existing *for itself* which is mediated with itself through another consciousness" (PhS, p. 115). Once this mediation has transpired, the master becomes a being-for-self.

The master becomes conscious of self only by virtue of the presence of an-other. This other is the slave, who “is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another” (PhS, p. 115), which means that he is a being-for-*other*. The slave is inextricably linked to *thinghood* (PhS, p. 115), and cannot break free from being considered a thing by the master. The master, on the other hand, ironically, desires the thing that is the slave. Why this desire? According to Singer (2001, p. 76), in the Hegelian sense, “[t]o desire something is to wish to possess it and thus not to destroy it altogether – but also to transform it into something that is yours, and thus to strip it of its foreignness.” The master desires the thing that is the slave in as much as the thing can be possessed, namely by defining what the thing is. Defining the thing that is the Other satisfies the desire of the master by virtue of representing an act of making the Other the same as the self. The Other nourishes the desire of the self to make the world its own. The master seizes power over the thing because he is the one who decides what the thing is (PhS, p. 115). What is the nature of the thing, according to the master? The answer to this is quite simple: “it is something merely negative” (PhS, p. 115).

The relation between master and slave has an ironic effect: “the lord [master] achieves his recognition through another consciousness” (PhS, p. 116) (the slave), and in so doing becomes dependent on the thing for his own self-consciousness (PhS, p. 117). The chains of the slave become that of the master as well. As a consequence, there exists no manner of freedom, only mutual enslavement to the *thing*. The slave is dependent on his thinghood and thus on his definition as thing by the master (PhS, p. 115). This dependence of the slave is held in place by servitude, in other words a fearful consciousness in which one’s whole being is seized with dread (PhS, p. 117): the slave fears annihilation (in other words death) by the master. The slave sets aside his own self-consciousness, in so doing negating himself, by providing servitude to the master in an attempt to rid himself of this fear (PhS, pp. 116, 117). The price the slave pays for keeping alive is servitude, which satisfies the desire the master has for possession of the Other. The slave, negating himself, does to himself the same thing that the master does to the slave. This negation, at first, draws back into itself and he makes his own “negativity an object and transform[s his] alienation into independent self-consciousness” (Oliver, 2004, p. 5). This transformation is brought about through the act of labour (or work), which finds expression in an object created by the slave. This created object serves an important function: the slave recognizes a representation of himself in the object, and consequently the object serves as a motivation for the slave to bring about his own liberation. In short, the slave’s labour sets him free. Through his newly acquired independent self-consciousness the slave becomes aware of what he really is (PhS, p. 118). His fear, at first muted and also turned inward, is externalized onto the master (PhS, pp. 118-119), and the master is seen as the object of his (the slave’s) fear (PhS, p. 117). The independent consciousness of the slave represents a spirit of resistance and rebellion against the master. Through this rebellion the slave comes to see himself as existing on his own accord by negating the object of his fear, namely the master (PhS, p. 118). As a consequence, the master becomes other to the slave, which also heralds the slave’s entry into subjecthood.

The slave still fears the master, but overcomes this fear by seeing the master as an object and therefore a *thing*. The thing has been seized as the possession of the slave through his rebellion, and its nature is now his own making. What is the nature of the thing, according to the slave? The answer to this is quite ironic, for the shape of the thing is now a mirror image of the slave himself (PhS, p. 118), namely an object that needs to be mastered, negated and annihilated. Liberman (1999, p. 272) words this moment well when he says, “each subject objectifies the Other, i.e. each subject produces an object.”

The distinction between object and subject is an important one to take into account because it plays a big role in identifying the differences between Hegelian and Fanonian slavery (discussed in the next section). Following Lonergan (1992, p. 446) one can distinguish two elements in the Hegelian dialectic that is crucial for this distinction, namely the primacy of concepts and the integral role of sublation. Firstly, in short, concepts are primary because of its provision of meaning to objects, which results in the grasp of objects. In this respect the grasp of an object facilitates the move into being a subject. Secondly, this movement into subjecthood means that the object becomes sublated, meaning that it is consumed by the subject. In so doing, the object becomes dependent on the subject for its own nourishment and as a result its meaning hinges on that of the subject. The term object, then, refers to a self-consciousness that is not able to affix its own meaning and in so doing bring itself to realization. The object’s meaning is determined and constructed by an-other, and therefore it is a being-for-other. Therefore, a subject, in contrast, refers to a self-consciousness that is able to affix its own meaning, bringing about a realization of self, which means that he is a being-for-self. The subject’s realization comes at the cost of the object, which is sublated in the process whilst its meaning is derived from the subject and must also be acceptable to the subject. Hegel’s treatment of recognition ends with the slave turning the tables on the master by way of considering the master as an object, but this only happens after the slave regards himself as an object that needs to be transformed into a subject.

Fanon’s Recognition: White Master and Black Slave

Frantz Fanon provides a specific analysis of the theme of recognition in the work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and reinterprets Hegel in the colonial context in terms of race, namely the relationship between the white settler and Black man, in other words master and slave.³ He picks up where Hegel left off, stating that “man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognised by him” (BSWM, p. 216). This presents a number of positive and negative things to be said about recognition: positively, it seems that the desire or need for one to be recognised is a simple human attribute, which means that it is human to want to be recognised.⁴ Both positively and negatively, one is only human if recognised as such. Negatively, Fanon seems to suggest that the extent of the imposition of one’s existence on an-other becomes the measure of humanity, in other words one can only be human if one ensures that one imposes oneself on an-other successfully.

It must be clear that from the onset the concept of humanity is now problematised, but it is also qualified as the bond between self and the Other. This is clear when Fanon (BSWM, p. 217) says, “it is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his [man’s] own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of life is condensed.” Thus, I am only human if an-other recognises me as human. My humanity is inextricably intertwined with the Other, even though it seems that (Hegelian) humanity can only come about in the consumption of the Other because of the need or desire for recognition (Williams, 1997, p. 49). This need or desire is expressed in an “open conflict between black and white” (BSWM, p. 217) within the colonial context. The situation is such that the white settler regards the Black man as a slave (BSWM, p. 214) because he does not measure up to the standard of whiteness. In so doing the white settler asserts himself as the master. Therefore the Black slave mirrors everything that is bad to the white master, namely the negative characteristics of humanity. What are the negative characteristics of humanity, in the eyes of the white man, in the Black man? The white man considers Black men as “machine-animal-men” (BSWM, p. 220): they are partly human, partly animal, completely thing and object, and is there solely to perform labour (BSWM, p. 220).

Where there is, at least, some form of reciprocity in Hegel, Fanon points to a major departure in the colonial context with regards to the white master and Black slave (BSWM, p. 220-21). The white master finds the Black slave laughable and is not seeking recognition from the slave. Rather, the white master simply wants the Black slave to perform labour for him. However, the Black slave finds no liberation in his work (as the Hegelian slave does), and does not get embroiled in objectifying the master. He does not come to regard the white master as an object because he never turns his own negativity (a result of his negation and objectification by the master) into an object in the first place (Oliver, 2004, p. 5). This is a necessary step on the way to subjectivity, and the Black slave never makes this move. Instead, he wants to be *like* the white master and he is fixated with becoming a subject. This situation makes him less independent than the Hegelian slave because he always considers the subjectivity of the master, and never his own. The result of this is a paradox in which the Black slave finds himself: he wants to be recognised as a subject, but the master will not provide such recognition because in his consideration the slave is not human but part of nature and therefore an animal. Serequeberhan (1994, p. 46) points out that in the Hegelian sense, nature is equated with objecthood. Therefore, the white colonial master’s attitude rests exactly on a Hegelian presupposition concerning humanity. Human (or spiritual) existence is equated with self-conscious freedom (Serequeberhan, 1994, p. 139), in other words subjecthood, which is on a higher level than that of the unfree and naturally determined, namely the nonhuman. The master initially found himself on this level, but elevated himself to become human when he became conscious of himself, therefore forsaking his natural existence. This, according to Serequeberhan, is the most significant moment of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, and it is a moment that the Hegelian slave can also partake in. This moment transpires when the Hegelian slave becomes a subject in his own consideration when he regards the master as an object.

Fanon's Black slave never reaches this moment, but remains stuck within a fixation with the identity of the white master. The Hegelian slave turns away from the master and turns towards the object (BSWM, p. 220), therefore he considers the master as an object and in so doing asserts his own subjectivity. The Black slave, on the other hand, turns towards the master and abandons the object (BSWM, p. 220), therefore he considers the master's subjectivity as something he wants himself. The Hegelian slave attains subjectivity although he did not pursue it whilst the Black slave pursues subjectivity, but finds it unattainable. In the final analysis, the Hegelian slave both disallows definition of itself by the object (namely the master) and being considered as an object as such and in so doing takes hold of its own meaning. The Hegelian slave knows how to form an independent self-consciousness and his situation even becomes so radical that the master becomes dependent on the slave to uphold his own self-consciousness. Fanon's Black slave is not so fortunate and remains in an unfavourable situation. He does not create himself (BSWM, p. 220) and is dependent on the master for his own self-consciousness. Within this situation, at bottom, as Fanon puts it so succinctly, "[i]t is always a question of the subject; one never even thinks of the object" (BSWM, p. 212). The Black slave wants to be recognised as a subject, and never wants to be regarded as an object. The Black slave wants to be the "centre of attention", wants to be *the* subject. However, in the gaze of the white master the Black slave always fulfills the role of an object in four ways: firstly, the slave is an instrument against which the master measures his own superiority. Secondly, the slave enables the master to realize his subjective security. Thirdly, the slave helps the master in defining himself and the world. Fourthly and crucially, the slave is denied his individuality and liberty (BSWM, p. 212).

The Move into Conflict and Violence

The situation between the white master and Black slave becomes even more radical and bleak. The Black slave's desire for subjectivity is by no means exhausted, despite the odds stacked up against him. He is "a man crucified. The environment has shaped him, has horribly drawn and quartered him ... [he has] an indisputable complex of dependence on the [white master]" (BSWM, p. 216). The Black slave cannot simply remain in the place that has been assigned to him, for he seeks to make an end to this (BSWM, p. 216). For Fanon this can only happen through conflict and violence. According to Fanon "human reality in-itself-for-itself can be achieved only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies" (BSWM, p. 218). Conflict, it seems, is a central feature in human reality if one is to be transformed from being an object to being a subject, thus facilitating the entry into self-consciousness. Fanon continues by saying, "self-consciousness accepts the risk of its life, and consequently it threatens the Other in his physical being" (BSWM, p. 218), implying, it seems to me, that the pursuit of subjectivity by the Black slave threatens the master's life. The desire for subjectivity, for the Black slave, represents three things: firstly, he wants to make himself recognized (BSWM, p. 217) by virtue of his own agency and he wants to assign meaning to himself as he pleases. Secondly, he wants to be considered as one that can desire, and is not devoid of the ability to transform himself.

Thirdly, he does not want to be considered a mere thing. Fanon looks to Hegel for a clear articulation of the Black slave's desire for subjectivity: "It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus it is tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not *bare existence*, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance, is not its mere absorption in the expanse of life" (PhM, p. 233). For Hegel freedom exists only because one is prepared to take the ultimate risk to obtain it. Freedom is therefore essentially negative because it is not something that it is my *right* to have. Freedom is gained only beyond struggle, thus it something to be *earned*. This freedom is characterized by the ability to assign meaning to oneself. The reason for this is that self-consciousness is not bare existence (being-in-itself) but rather "pure self-existence, being-for-self" (PhM, p. 233). To recapitulate, in my view, being-for-self refers to the individual that has agency in terms of assigning meaning to one's self. The freedom and agency that is involved in being-for-self is not granted to the Black slave, or rather, *he does not grant himself this freedom and agency*. According to Fanon this is the case because recognition without struggle does take place as the white master, one day, without conflict, "said to the Negro, 'From now on you are free'" (BSWM, p. 219). Here the white master's words seem contradictory as its tone seems normative in a sense, commanding the Black slave to accept that he is now free because he has the same rights as the master. However, this is an empty recognition as "the former slave wants to make himself recognized" (BSWM, p. 217) and be in control of how this transpires. Thus, he wants to be in control of the "what" in himself that is recognized, namely the image and identity conveyed to the master of old and also to himself. And yet, the desire to be like the white master persists.

The situation of the Fanonian slave-object is described well by Hegel (PhM, p. 233): "The individual who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained the truth of his recognition as an independent self consciousness." This is indeed an interesting point in my view, and it throws some light on the idea of personhood, at least in the Hegelian sense. Personhood can be gained without struggle, but this does not necessarily imply that one has gained freedom or agency in being able to provide oneself with meaning. It seems then that personhood does not imply mutual agency and freedom. It is rather a question of what kind of personhood one gains: is it a personhood of equality following on the master's decision to forsake his hold on the slave, meaning that he simply does not oppress the slave anymore and the slave has the *same* rights as the master; or is it a personhood of superiority that was preceded by a violent struggle after which the slave has rights that are *superior* to that of the master. This problematises personhood, for equal rights seem to be a fair trade but also seem to be no more than a simple truce with violence simmering just under the surface. In Fanon's view, the Black slave will only be satisfied if the dialectic is inverted, and the means to do this is violence. The values of the white master are simply inherited and exercised by the slave and not transformed, transcended or overcome in order to reach values that are authentically the slave's own. This leaves one at a rather bleak juncture. Is there any hope in coming to terms with the colonial situation between the white master and Black slave? Is it at all possible to make the move from violence to mutual recognition on an intersubjective level? I think that such a move could be possible if one turns to Fanon's characterization of humanity, which could serve as a point of entry into mutual recognition.

Fanon's Characterization of Humanity

Fanon, in my view, provides three helpful suggestions in the direction of mutual recognition that forms his characterization of humanity: firstly, the importance of acknowledging differences among people; secondly, the integral role of action as it relates to the formation of subjectivity; and thirdly, the basic values of humanity.

The Acknowledgment of Difference

Fanon reveals that the affirmation of differences between Black and white is important. This does not mean that there are *only* differences between Black and white, but if differences are stamped out then forgetfulness creeps in of both colonialism's atrocities and the history of race and racism it embodies. How is this forgetfulness a problem? According to Fanon the white man, addressing the Black man as 'brother', attempts to convince the Black man that there are in fact no differences between black and white (BSWM, p. 221). However, this is not done for reasons of brotherhood. The origin of this address, says Fanon, is much rather an indifference from the white man for the differences between himself and that of the (former) Black slave (BSWM, p. 221). More importantly, it is also done from a simple paternalistic curiosity that the white man has in the Black man (BSWM, p. 221), meaning that he has an interest in the Black man as far as the former slave can be of economic and political assistance to the white man's aspirations in this respect. Under the surface of the rhetoric according to which the white man proclaims black and white to be equal, there are ulterior motives. Fanon would have it that this is not actually an assertion of equality, but rather of sameness. It is an assertion serving in the name of economic and political functionality and expediency, seeking to ascertain the gain that the Other can provide in this respect. Fanon opposes this motivation and asserts, "yet the Negro *knows* that there is a difference. He *wants* it" (BSWM, p. 221). The acknowledgement, maybe even the celebration of difference, is key to the formation of self-consciousness. The acknowledgment of the role and impact of race in society is an issue that should not simply be skirted over. It could be said that a forgetfulness of race can even result in a forgetfulness, or misappropriation, of being in the sense that people cannot properly develop a self-consciousness in the Fanonian sense. Difference, according to Fanon, is affirmed in what he calls the maintenance of alterity by the Black man (BSWM, p. 222), which means that the self affirms itself as fundamentally different in certain respects to the Other. However, Fanon calls this an "[a]lterity of rupture, of conflict, of battle" (BSWM, p. 222), once again alluding to the violence that waits on the horizon. In my view, at bottom this is a reference to the self's resistance to its objectification. One can never fully be sure of one's own subjectivity under the gaze of the Other, as Fanon asserts, "[the black slave is] [u]nable ever to be sure whether the white man considers him consciousness in-itself-for-itself" (BSWM, p. 222). This uncertainty motivates a call to action by the self, a motivation that moves one to assert one's subjectivity by affirming difference instead of seeking *only* sameness in self and the Other.

Action and Subjectivity

For Fanon, action is integral to the formation of subjective self-consciousness. In no uncertain terms Fanon states, “[t]he former slave needs a challenge to his humanity, he wants a conflict, a riot” (BSWM, p. 221). The former slave is rendered active by the challenges from the outside to his desire for subjectivity. He asserts his subjectivity by virtue of this challenge, in reaction to the objectification of himself by the white man. The importance of action as central to Fanon’s idea of subjectivity is, however, a notion that problematises and even undermines recognition. In this respect Chari (2004, p. 118) notes that the recognition model fails to provide the conditions for the realization of the agency of the colonized subject, something that action does provide. Therefore, action seems to transcend the aims of recognition. Although I concur with Chari that action helps in the provision of agency, I feel that recognition is left problematised but not necessarily undermined or left behind as something that had to be transcended. In my view, action and recognition could (and should) co-exist as a means of attaining one’s subjectivity. This I say because it seems to me that only once intelligent thought has transpired can Fanonian action take place. According to Fanon, “[t]o educate man is to be *actional*, preserving in all his relations his respect for basic values that constitute a human world, is the prime task of him who, having taken thought, prepares to act” (BSWM, p. 222). Fanon is very clear about the significance and utter importance of action in coming to terms with the end of oppression. However, before one can enter *humane* action, one needs to put thought into what one considers to be basic values that constitute the human world. These basic values, in my view, could serve as point of entry into mutual recognition, conferring subjectivity on both self and the Other.

The Basic Values of Humanity

Fanon provides his selection of values that motivates action from people, those values that people pursue, even risking death in the process. He puts it forward as follows, “man is a *yes*. I will never stop reiterating that. *Yes* to life. *Yes* to love. *Yes* to generosity” (BSWM, p. 222). These values constitute the backbone of humanity and also mutual recognition: recognition of life, love and generosity in one’s fellow human being and in oneself. It serves only as a starting point of entry for constituting humanity as it properly facilitates mutual recognition and mutual subjectivity. These values also serve both as the motivation towards action, and as the successful result of action, which implies that action should bring about a human society based on these values. Fanon considers action to be superior to reaction when he says, “[m]an’s behaviour is not only reactional. And there is always resentment in reaction” (BSWM, p. 222). Here Fanon follows Nietzsche in telling us that human behaviour must be actional and that freedom is to be found in practice. This once again reiterates the point that action must follow on the conceptualization of values that are worth pursuing. The worth of these values depends on whether they affirm the value of humanity as the “supreme good” (BSWM, p. 218). Therefore, one must grant others life, love and generosity as revealed in practice and demonstrated in daily life, in the daily interaction with the Other.

Nevertheless, I want to suggest that reaction is not necessarily always a negative thing. Action in this case can also be a reaction against something, namely against transgressions of humanity. These transgressions are conceptualized by Fanon when he says, “man is also a *no*. *No* to scorn of man. *No* to degradation of man. *No* to exploitation of man. *No* to the butchery of what is most human in man: freedom” (BSWM, p. 222). Humans are defined by their desire for life, love and generosity, but also by their desire both for freedom and a mutual subjectivity in which agency is afforded both to self and the Other for the provision of meaning to one’s own life. This freedom is both a value and a practice, and transgressions against it almost certainly result in a violation of human life. Therefore one’s action, in favour of mutual subjectivity, must at the same time be a reaction against scorn, degradation and exploitation aimed at human life. These transgressions (against the Other) also represent saying no to one’s *own* humanity and inevitably results in the subversion of one’s own subjectivity. Self and the Other is inextricably dependent on a simple and basic, but mutually beneficial, conceptualization of humanity. Fanon provides the starting point for such a conceptualization and in that I find the optimistic moment in Fanon’s (unnerving) reading of Hegel, namely a point of entry into mutual recognition.

Reciprocity as Key to Mutual Recognition

Fanon considers reciprocity to be a key element in Hegel’s recognition. In fact, he considers absolute reciprocity to be the foundation of the Hegelian dialectic (BSWM, p. 217). Recognition that is one-sided cannot work since, as Fanon asserts, “action from one side only would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both” (BSWM, p. 217). The search for an authentic identity, and meaning to life, can only be fulfilled in mutual recognition. The starting point to mutual recognition is the move from objecthood to subjecthood. This is a need that is intergral to the constitution of a healthy and functional human society. To use Fanon’s words (with liberty), each one of us “is an isolated, sterile, salient atom with sharply defined rights of passage, each one of [us] *is*. Each one of [us] wants to *be*, to *emerge*” (BSWM, p. 212). It could be said that one primitively begins as an *is*, in other words a being-in-itself, but one wants to *be* and emerge into being recognized. One does not want to be considered as an object (being-for-other), but wants to emerge as a subject (being-for-self), which importantly will bring one’s self-consciousness into being. This is done, on a primitive level, with the corroboration of the Other (BSWM, p. 313). The Other must be present to bring about the transition from being-for-other to being-for-self. However, the Other requires the same, namely the presence of oneself, to reach the same result and as a consequence a society of comparison is formed (BSWM, p. 213). This environment of comparison perpetuates the cycle of recognition, reinforcing identities and knowledge, and bringing about a race of people that all share a certain sameness. Fanon describes this society of comparison as follows:

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else. I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity insofar as I pursue something other than life; insofar as I do battle for the creation of a human world – that is, of a world of reciprocal recognitions. (BSWM, p. 218)

At the root of the need for recognition is a simple conviction that the self has about itself, namely that the self is not a mere thing, not to be considered as an object. This refusal to be objectified drives the desire for subjectivity. This desire opens up the possibility of independence, freedom, agency and personhood. This desire also represents the move “beyond life toward a supreme good that is the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth” (BSWM, p. 218). The search for such truth, for a supreme good beyond life, represents the creation of the human world in which one seeks reciprocal recognitions by recognizing that which is human in an-other.

To recapitulate, mutual recognition leads to a realization of the value of my own life and the transcendence thereof in realizing the value of the life of an-other. This realization brings me to view my own value, but also that of the Other I so desperately need, as “a primal value without reference to life” (BSWM, p. 217), in other words a value that transcends both of us and requires affirmation in our actions aimed at each other. This is the basis for the notion of reciprocal recognitions, namely the infinite value of human life. This infinity includes my own life and that of the Other. With this simple but profound idea Fanon leaves us with a simple task, namely to affirm the infinite value of human life in our daily interaction with one another.

Conclusion

The attempt in this paper was to show that an optimistic moment lurks in Fanon’s sober and unnerving reading of Hegel’s master and slave as it manifests in the colonial context. This is not to discount or deny the strong and direct message Fanon conveys in terms of the violence that transpired in the colonial context. Violence still plagues great parts of Africa, be it in the guise of war, terrorism or crime. In terms of our own context Fanon’s words on decolonisation (especially in *The Wretched of the Earth*) speaks to us most urgently and there is no denying its truth in reality. The aftermath of colonisation is a messy and uncompromising process in which human lives are lost or seriously damaged. It is because of the troubling persistence of violence in the postcolony that one should mine Fanon’s work for some hope amidst the stark realities of our times. There are a number of positive and empowering values that emerge from his work. In this paper I focused on his ideas regarding the pitfalls and possibilities of mutual recognition, which reveals a positive description of humanity.

These ideas are basic, but strong in its simplicity because it is based in the concrete reality of Fanon's own life experience. Philosophy is about ideas interacting with concrete reality, making a difference in everyday life and uplifting human life. This is where Fanon takes us: he provides the values underpinning the infinite value of human life, and it is up to us to make use of these values to affirm this infinity and recognise it in our fellow human beings.

Notes

¹ For reasons of clarity the meanings I attach to the Hegelian self and the Other are as follows: *self* refers to the embodied self. This includes consciousness of self, which only I have exclusive access to. *The Other* refers to the embodied Other. However, I rather have a mediated access, instead of full access, to her consciousness of self.

² Cited as PhS (Miller translation) or PhM (Baille translation).

³ Cited as BSWM.

⁴ I will, at certain points in the discussion, make use of the term 'human' as I regard *sole* reference to the term 'man' as sexist. However, I will make some use of the term 'man' for reasons of clarity of style in order to remain connected to Fanon's vocabulary and avert a confusion of terms. The same applies to the pronoun 'he', which I will use throughout.

References

- Chari, A. (2004). Exceeding Recognition. *Sartre Studies International*. 10 (2), 110-121.
- Fanon, F. (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks*. C. L. Markman (Trans.). London: Pluto Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1949). *The Phenomenology of Mind*. J. B. Baille (Trans.). London: Allen and Unwin.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A.V. Miller (Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Liberman, K. (1999). The Dialectics of Oppression: A Phenomenological Perspective. *Philosophy Today*. 43 (3), 272-282.
- Lonergan, B. J. F. (1992). *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

-
- Oliver, K. (2004). *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Serequeberhan, T. (1994). *The Hermeneutics of African Philosophy: Horizon and Discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Singer, P. (1983). *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. R. (1997). *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.