Hegel on the ‘Other’: introducing the concept of recognition in Hegel’s Phenomenology.

Philip Tonner
Abstract
This paper introduces the notion of Recognition in the section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled ‘A. INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS; LORDSHIP AND BONDAGE’ by way of a commentary. Hegel’s view is that in order for any self-consciousness to obtain it must be acknowledged as such by another self-consciousness. For Hegel, acknowledgement emerges as a necessary condition for self-consciousness. As such, Hegel’s account of self-consciousness raises the problem of intersubjectivity, or the account of the relation between more than one self-consciousness and I suggest, without attempting to establish, some intuitive lines of defence of the Hegelian position. I suggest that the dialectic of lordship and bondage, or as it is commonly referred to, the Master-Slave dialectic, cannot be fully comprehended without an adequate understanding of Hegel’s account of Recognition.
I

The section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled ‘A. INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: LORDSHIP AND BONDAGE’ (Hegel, G.W.F (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. By A.V. Miller, p111)\(^1\), begins with the claim that ‘Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged’ (Hegel 1977 p111). This is a strong claim: it amounts to the condition that in order for any self-consciousness to obtain it must be acknowledged as such by another self-consciousness. Acknowledgement is then a necessary condition for self-consciousness.

By bringing the concept of acknowledgement into his discussion of self-consciousness Hegel raises the problem of intersubjectivity, the account of the relation between more than one self-consciousness. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is conceived as an introduction to Hegel’s systematic philosophy. As Pippin has it, this text is an account of the human race taken as a ‘developing and progressively more self-conscious subject’ and it is testimony to the importance of the notion of self-consciousness in this project that it should feature so prominently at this early stage of the overall project.

Some commentators on Hegel have argued that since Hegel is an idealist and that the central tenet of idealism, taken as ontological or methodological, is that objectivity is ultimately ‘dependent on and relative to subjectivity’, (Williams, p1.) an account of intersubjectivity is impossible\(^2\). Adopting this position would entail that the ‘other’ self-consciousness, as object for self-consciousness, would not be ‘genuinely other’. The other self-consciousness would in fact be dependent upon and ultimately reducible to the original self-consciousness, as it is this original self-consciousness that is constitutive of objectivity.

It is my aim in this paper simply to introduce the notion of recognition in Hegel’s phenomenology. Despite this, I will indicate some possible lines of interpretation and defence of Hegel’s position regarding intersubjectivity as these have been developed in the literature. For example, it is Williams’ view that such a reading of Hegel that reduces the independent status of the other is wrong-headed, for, as he points out, although Hegel does not actually use the term ‘intersubjectivity’ in his phenomenology, he does in fact give an account of it under the concept of recognition (*anerkennung*). While I will not attempt a thorough going defence of Hegel, this essay would be fruitless if it did not suggest any possibilities in this direction. So, we have it that acknowledgement (*anerkennen*) and recognition (*anerkennung*) are two sides of

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\(^1\) From now on this section will be referred to as ‘section A’.

the same coin for Hegel and this can be made conspicuous if we turn to Williams’ alternative translation of the section from the Phenomenology we have quoted.

Williams renders it thus, ‘Self-consciousness is in and for itself in and through the fact that it exists in and for itself for an other. That is, it exists only as recognized or acknowledged’, (Williams 1992 p149). For Hegel, self-consciousness is intimately connected with the concept of recognition. Thus, in this section of the Phenomenology Hegel is not simply dealing with the epistemological question of ‘other minds’, that is, the question of an individual’s entitlement to take what appear to be other human beings to be beings like itself, that is, other human subjects. Rather, Hegel is dealing with something more complex. As Inwood has put it, he is dealing with the problem of how an individual becomes a person in the full sense of that term. And this is possible through gaining the acknowledgement of others (see Inwood, M (1992): ‘recognition and acknowledgement’ in, A Hegel Dictionary, Blackwell, p245).

Indeed it is possible to go further than this, in agreement with Williams, and state that, for Hegel, consciousness in general is something that is ‘embodied, situated, and equiprimordial with other subjects and the life-world’, (Williams 1992 p142). Subjectivity is intersubjective essentially, it is intersubjectivistic and holistic.

‘Spirit’ is the English translation of the German term Geist. Geist is an essential concept in Hegel’s philosophy. In order to fully grasp the centrality of the concept of recognition we must realise that it is reciprocal recognition that provides for the genesis of Geist, ‘an I that is a We, and a We that is an I’. Hegel’s philosophy is the transformation of transcendental philosophy since in the Phenomenology, Geist is not to be construed as a subject held to be logically prior to its objects or, in Kantian terms, a ‘transcendental ego’ in contrast to the ‘empirical ego’. On the contrary, Geist as an ‘I that is a We and a We that is an I’ is fundamentally as social subject, that is embodied and situated and so on. As Williams reads Hegel, it is the transcendental dimension of Geist that is abstracted from the intersubjective-social dimension.

Coming to grips with the concept of recognition in and through the dialectic of self-consciousness is an important task if only for the fact that the dialectic of lordship and bondage, or as it is commonly referred to, the Master-Slave dialectic, cannot be fully comprehended without an adequate understanding of the importance of recognition.
II

‘Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness’,

(Hegel 1977 p110).

Hegel insists on the priority of Geist, the collective subject, an his account of the logic of conceptual and historical development is essentially dialectical (see Pippin, p314-315). The dialectical resolution of what appear at first to be irreconcilable opposites is at the heart of the Hegelian drama. It is essential to keep this in mind in our discussion of the development of self-consciousness. Hegel’s view was that opposite notions could in fact be shown to be compatible when seen from the point of view of a higher-order ‘notion’ (Begriff) that resolved the opposition.

One of Hegel’s most often discussed and contested innovations was his dialectical method. A central example of such dialectical development is his discussion of the notions of being, nothing and becoming from his Science of Logic. There he argues that the attempt to categorise the indeterminate immediate, that which simply ‘is’, as pure being negates itself and requires that which occurs in this way as ‘nothing’. This opposition of being and nothing requires the higher-order resolution of the terms with the notion of becoming (Pippin, p315). It will be useful to keep the notion of dialectic in mind when considering the movement of self-consciousness as this is played out in his phenomenology.

In order to prepare the way for a discussion of recognition and self-consciousness proper we must first engage in a discussion of the relationship of self-consciousness to desire (begierde). Desire is the first and lowest form of self-consciousness. In fact, self-conscious ‘is Desire in general’, (Hegel 1977 p105). Hegel’s discussion of desire is premised on the conviction that consciousness is itself alive and part of nature. Desire is a level of consciousness that not only belongs to human subjects, it extents to the animal kingdom.

Desire is not something disinterested and theoretical. Rather, it is animal in that the self needs something, namely, some object that is other to it, in order for its own preservation. What is achieved by this negating of the other by a particular self-consciousness in the mode of desire is, as Gadamer reads Hegel, a sense of self-certainty (Gadamer, H.G (1976): Hegel’s Dialectic, Five Hermeneutical Studies, trans, P.C. Smith, p60). As Hegel states in §174 (p109) of the Phenomenology

self-consciousness is…certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is for it the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object
and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner (Hegel 1977 p109).

By this consumption of the independent object the particular self-consciousness is invigorated and self-satisfied as it is pure negativity, it conceives of objects as there purely for it and moves with the un-relenting drive to satisfy it’s (desire) self. Given this, Hegel concludes that it is something ‘other’ than self-consciousness this is the essence of desire and the feeling of ‘self’ achieved in desire is not the truth of self-consciousness. In this experience self-consciousness is informed that the object is independent of it and self-consciousness qua desire is forced to face up to the fact that it is dependent on it’s object as something other to itself (Gadamer 1976 p61).

One must at this stage not be led into thinking that self-consciousness as desire does not want something other than itself for its satisfaction, for it does. It is only by the fact that this other exists that self-consciousness can gain the satisfaction it does by negating it. It is this negating of the object that is at issue for Hegel in his account of self-consciousness. In the negation of the other/object (for example, the eating of a piece of fruit) the other loses its self-sufficiency. In satisfying our hunger the object is annihilated and taken into us. And it is just for this reason that the feeling of self achieved is not true self-consciousness (Gadamer 1976 p61). As Hegel says: ‘Desire and the self-certainy obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object’, (Hegel, 1977 p109).

The reason that this is not true self-consciousness is because in such a condition a particular self-consciousness is at the level of an animal that slavishly seeks the satisfaction of its instinctual drives. As Gadamer reads this point, in this condition nothing fulfils the self-consciousness in any way that is distinct from that which fulfils an animal that is consumed by the need to fulfil its instinctual drives (Gadamer 1976 p61). So long as this is the case, self-consciousness is not true self-consciousness.

The basic pattern of, desire → consumption, desire → consumption, can be repeated ad infinitum and is in essence the reduction of the other to the same (Williams 1992 p145). The other is consumed, brought into the individual self-consciousness to fill up its lack. Desire is metaphysical in that it demonstrates the inessential nature of external finite objects. Desire brings such objects to presence and immediately annihilates this presence. In annihilating presence desire rules itself out as the truth of self-consciousness.
In self-consciousness a particular self-consciousness is still logically dependent on another. The difference from desire for this self-consciousness is spelled out by Hegel in §175. He says:

On account of the independence of the object, therefore...[self-consciousness]...can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is (Hegel 1977 p109).

The first point to note here is that the object in question remains independent. Self-consciousness is still dependent on an other entity. The most salient points to note are that the object in question must carry out this negation of itself in itself; for it is in itself the negative; and that it must be for the other (self-consciousness) what it is.

The object in question must not cease to exist: it must be for the other. It must exist for the other. We must un-pack this. The particular object carries out the process of negation itself. It affects the negation of itself in itself. An example of this would be the decaying of a piece of fruit. By an ‘inner necessity’ the fruit decays and will eventually cease to exist. It does this without relation to any other.

For Hegel, the particular form of negation to be found in desire is insufficient for the transition to self-consciousness because the particular object (the piece of fruit) can’t relate itself to a particular self-consciousness as it negates itself. Self-consciousness must find an entity (an entity like itself) that can relate to it (the particular self-consciousness) while it negates itself. Such an entity can be the negative (the process of negation) and continue existing while being for the other self-consciousness what it is. That is, it can relate itself to the particular self-consciousness while negating itself.

Self-consciousness as desire is consumed by itself and seeks itself in the other. To that extent, unsurprisingly, it is only able to find itself in the other if the other is independent of the particular self-consciousness and acknowledges that it (the other) ‘does not exist in its own right’, (Gadamer 1976 p61). The other degrades itself in that it acknowledges that it ‘exists for the other as what it is’. Given the fact that simple objects such as fruit cannot relate themselves to an other while affecting such a negation, the only possible other that can be in this way - relating itself to a particular self-consciousness while affecting this kind of negation which results in the objects continued existence - is another self-consciousness. It is precisely in this manner that the particular desire seeking self-consciousness attains satisfaction.

Through all of this Hegel has shown that if self-consciousness is to become ‘true self-consciousness’ it must find another self-consciousness that is willing to perform this negation and ‘be for it’. As Hegel says: ‘Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness’, (Hegel 1977 p110).
III

In the stage of desire the particular self-consciousness, in the first place, relates to an object (the object of desire). The relation of the particular self-consciousness to this object can be summed up thus: the particular self-consciousness relates to an object such that it negates the object and is therefore determined to relate only to itself (that is to itself as the negation of this object). The object has its own independence (it is ontologically independent of the particular self-consciousness); yet the particular self-consciousness is dependent upon the object, as it requires its (the objects) existence and presence so as to negate it.

As desire, after it has been fulfilled, is then re-aroused (as hunger, for example, is re-aroused over time) this relation of desire to its object continues indefinitely. This fact is central to the logic of desire and as such desire is precluded from becoming true self-consciousness. The category of Life construed in this way as the simple object of desire is thus not sufficient for the transition to true self-consciousness. This is due to the fact that, so construed, Life cannot affect this specific form of negation within itself. That is, the negation which results in the objects continued existence and being for (relating itself to) the other (self-consciousness).

In the case of recognition the particular self-consciousness is still dependent on some other. The difference is that in the case of recognition, this other, firstly, does not cease to exist, secondly, affects the negation within itself, and thirdly recognises the other (self-consciousness) as a self-consciousness. In the case of recognition, the other in question has to be another self-consciousness for only another self-consciousness can remain existing after affecting the desired negation of itself within itself. Desire is constantly vacillating between the two poles of experiencing (encountering) itself and something else, namely its object. As we have seen this process can go on indefinitely without desire ever attaining true self-consciousness.

IV

Before moving on to self-consciousness and recognition it is important to take note of the following point. The kind of phenomenological ontology that is going on here is must not be identified with making factual claims about any particular other (Williams 1992 p147). It is important to heed this before we discuss Hegel’s account of recognition which deals explicitly with more than one self-consciousness. Hegel’s account will be an immanent critique since consciousness provides, as he says, its own ‘criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself’ (Hegel 1977 p53).

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3 As we have already noted Life does negate itself. Our example above was of the piece of fruit. The point here is that this particular form of negation does not result in the particular object relating itself to self-consciousness.
Hegel is not relating ‘facts’ about what happens in the case of desire or in the case of the encounter between two self-consciousnesses. Rather, Hegel is engaged in phenomenology. He is engaging in an immanent account of what is logically (as apposed to, say, semantically) entailed in the stages of consciousness. Hegel’s account holds necessarily in that he is giving us the phenomenological development of consciousness towards self-consciousness.

These points go some way towards explaining the fact that Hegel’s prose description of these stages is conceptual and logical. He is not concerned with what did or did not happen in a particular encounter between self-consciousnesses. He is concerned with the necessary stages that must be gone through on the way to self-consciousness.

Given that Hegel’s concerns are phenomenological ‘fact’ has been, to paraphrase Williams’s paraphrase of Husserl, ‘bracketed’. It is for this reason that Williams reads the first seven (§178-§184) sections of ‘section A4’ as an eidetics. That is, if Williams is correct, they are a bracketing of fact and an ‘elaboration of meaning’. Phenomenology, broadly conceived, is characterised by its concern with the seeing and elaboration of the meaning of that which shows itself in itself, from itself. ‘Bracketed’ in this sense equates in meaning to ‘put out of consideration on logical grounds’. It is not the mere, arbitrary ‘exclusion’ from consideration of fact, rather it is a methodological device applied for logical reasons. Such an eidetics of recognition brackets the empirical and instead deals with what appears or phenomena. Hegel is doing phenomenology. He offers us a phenomenological analysis of the transition of consciousness to self-consciousness as opposed to a ‘factual’ or ‘particular’ description.

V

It is in sections §178-§184 of the Phenomenology that Hegel deals explicitly with recognition or with, as Williams suggests, the meaning of recognition. In these sections Hegel offers us a phenomenological accounts of intersubjectivity that is an account of the ‘doubling’ of consciousness. Hegel says, ‘The notion of this its unity in its duplication embraces many and varied meanings’, (Hegel 1977 p111). Due to the fact that self-consciousness can only exist when recognised, it is a logical necessity that consciousness will get embroiled in the dialectic of recognition (Gadamer, p63).

On Williams account the ‘meaning of recognition’ has three components. These are: (1) the doubling of consciousness, (2) the double-significations of the moments of recognition, and (3) the two basic stages of recognition, conflict and opposition, and the overcoming of such in mutual reconciliation and releasement. Phase (1) and (2)

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4 ‘A. INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS: LORDSHIP AND BONDAGE’.
encompass abstract universality and (3) the opposition between particulars and mediated universality (Williams 1992 p147-148). These will help clarify the stages of the following discussion.

As has already been noted, Hegel is giving us the phenomenological stages that have to be gone through by consciousness in order to achieve self-consciousness. As a result of this the first stage of consciousness he describes in his analysis of recognition is primitive. It should be noted at this stage that what holds for one self-consciousness in our discussion holds for the other self-consciousness as well. Both conceive themselves to be absolute negativity and universality and both are therefore drawn into this dialectic.

‘Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself’, (Hegel 1977 p111). This is the first phase, the ‘doubling of self-consciousness’ and of ‘abstract parochial universality’; in other words, it is the moment of initial confrontation with the other. In this stage, each of the two self-consciousnesses in question operate with the assumption that they are absolute negativity. They assume themselves to be without relation or qualification by any other. Self-consciousness ‘has come out of itself’. In this ‘coming out of itself’ in its initial confrontation with the other the self-consciousness(es) experience is one of an unexpected transcedence of self. The presence of the other causes the particular self-consciousness to be projected into a relation. This amounts to a self-loss.

The result of this confrontation and shift is twofold. It is the stage of the ‘double significations of the moments of recognition’. The particular self-consciousness ‘has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being’, (Hegel 1977 p111), and has superseded the other since it sees the other, not as an essential being, but rather as it’s own self. The presence of the other has caused a change that results in finding oneself as other and the threat to, and possible loss of, the perception which the particular self-consciousness(es) has of itself as absolute negativity and universality. This very perception the self-consciousness has of itself as absolute negativity and universality is present in the fact that this particular self-consciousness is not able to recognize the other as an other. As such, the self-consciousness sees only itself in this initial confrontation.

Self-consciousness, then, has two fundamental structures: being-for-self and being-for-another. These structures reflect the doubling of self-consciousness in intersubjectivity with the notion of a self-consciousness taken as for another self-consciousness. This moment of the doubling of consciousness is all important. It shows that recognition is unlike the phase of desire wherein consumption annihilates the object and demonstrates in inessential nature. As distinct from this, the doubling
of consciousness correlates both internal and external structures between the two fundamental structures of ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-other’.

This process is the process whereby the particular self-consciousness(es) discovers that it is not absolute but is in fact particular and opposed to another discrete being. This discovery leads to the third stage in the dialectic, that of the opposition between these particular self-consciousnesses, the resulting conflict, and then to the ‘overcoming’ of this in the phase of ‘mutual reconciliation and releasement’ which is the phase of ‘mediated universality’.

Rather than simply give up their claims to universality and absolute negativity each self-consciousness seeks to retain these elements. Therefore, their ‘self-loss’ from the universal to the particular has to be overcome somehow. Each self-consciousness seeks to cancel this ensuing ‘particularity’ and this means that each self-consciousness seeks to eliminate the opposing other respectively. Each self-consciousness seeks to demonstrate its retention of absolute negativity and universality and thus must exhibit that it transcends its particular existence. It must demonstrate that it exceeds and is not bound by its existence as a mere particular. As Hegel intimates, self-consciousness ‘must supersede this otherness of itself’, (Hegel 1977 p111). Thus, each self-consciousness must risk its own life and seek to extinguish the other. This drive to eliminate particularity, the other being emblematic of particularity, leads directly to struggle.

This stage of recognition is a doubling of the process of desire. It is a process whereby the self-consciousness must bring itself back to itself, in the manner of a self-coincidence, and this is achieved by eliminating the threat of the other. This pattern is essentially egocentric. Each particular self-consciousness seeks to in some way consume the other. They seek to suppress and/or eliminate the other. To this extent, the stage of recognition ultimately issues in conflict. Conflict, as it has been revealed phenomenologically, seems to be essential to the establishment of recognition.

‘Struggle’ is not merely about the negation of the other. It is about recognition and the relation between self-consciousnesses. Each self-consciousness requires the continued existence of the other so that the other can recognise it fully. The elimination of the other would be self-defeating since it would result in the elimination of its very condition. Recognition is, after all, the condition of self-consciousness. The other has to continue to exist so it can affect the negation of itself in itself and thus be for the other what it is.

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5 It should be noted that the hyphenation in ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-other’ indicates that ‘being-for-self’ and ‘being-for-other’ are not ontologically separable. Thus, for example, ‘being-for-self’ cannot be separated into ‘being’, ‘for’, and ‘self’ but should be regarded as a single concept.
We should note that the particular self-consciousness cannot simply force the other to recognise it. This would only serve to occasion the situation where the particular self-consciousness would in fact no longer be absolute negativity and universality as it would be qualified in terms of this relation to the other. A stage of mediation must ensue where the absolutely negative and universal self-consciousnesses seek to incorporate their other. This is the stage of ‘reconciliation and releasement’ and thus of the emergence of ‘mediated universality’.

Recognition must involve ‘co-operation’ of both self-consciousnesses. As Hegel says: ‘Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both’, (Hegel 1977 p112). Mediation has to be reciprocal and carried out between both self-consciousnesses. Each self-consciousness must win itself in the other’s recognition and affect a return to itself out of its state of being ‘othered’. Doing so enriches the self-consciousness so enlarged by the moment of recognition by the other. Hegel expresses this in the following way:

This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return into itself. For first, through the supersession, it receives back its own self, because, by superseding its otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free”, (Hegel 1977 p111).

The ‘enlargement and enrichment’ of the self-consciousnesses in question is only possible if the particular self-consciousness allows the other to go free. Importantly, this ‘letting the other to go free’ is a granting the other their state of being free and thus to freely recognise the particular self-consciousness that let it go free. As Gadamer points out, freedom here is crucial for only if the particular self-consciousness is free can it provide the necessary confirmation to the first self-consciousness that it requires. Both self-consciousnesses mutually recognise each other in a manner that is only possible when the other is no longer seen as a deadly threat.

Recognition and interdependence turn out to be the necessary conditions of true self-consciousness and absolute negativity and universality have been rejected. Each self-consciousness must allow the other their freedom. This is the stage of reciprocal recognition.

**Conclusion**

We now have an introductory account of the notion of Recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in view. Inevitably there is much more that could be said that would defend Hegel and that might treat of the movement of *Geist* in far more detail.
While I did not attempt this here, I believe that a reading of Hegel on intersubjectivity would benefit from more than a passing reference to later phenomenological thinkers, such as Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas. Despite these shortcomings, it should be clear by now that, as far as Hegel is concerned, it is the kind of recognition that he is dealing with that is at the heart of social solidarity. While such solidarity may remain only implicit in the stage of self-consciousness, in such a state, mutual recognition and releasement of the other to go free is presupposed, (Williams 1992 p149). It is only through mutual recognition and releasement that Geist can emerge. In such a situation, being with others would not be a restriction of any self-consciousness’s freedom. Rather, it would be an enhancement of their freedom. To paraphrase, a genuinely social world lives by reciprocal recognition.

Recognition has a central role in the genesis of Geist, ‘an I that is a we and a we that is an I’. In the section of the Phenomenology of Spirit we have been dealing with Hegel offers us a phenomenological analysis of the necessary stages gone through on the way to self-consciousness but the concept of recognition features centrally in Hegel’s philosophy as a whole. It will be the means by which Geist is generated. The ‘universal consciousness and concrete identity’ that is Geist imubes the genuinely social world which ‘lives by reciprocal recognition’ and that is ‘a reciprocal recognition which is absolute Spirit’, (Hegel 1977 p408).
Bibliography


