

CHAPTER 5

*From desire to recognition: Hegel's account
of human sociality*

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Hardly any other of Hegel's works has attracted so much attention as the "Self-Consciousness" chapter in the *Phenomenology*. As difficult and inaccessible as the book may be on the whole, this chapter, in which consciousness exits "the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present" (109, ¶177) finally seems to give our understanding something to hold on to. All of a sudden, Hegel's account of the mind's self-experience takes on more striking colors, the lonely self-consciousness unsuspectingly meets with other subjects, and what was previously a merely cognitive happening is transformed into a social drama consisting of a "struggle for life and death." In short, this chapter brings together all the elements capable of supplying post-idealistic philosophy's hunger for reality with material for concretion and elaboration. Hegel's first students took the opportunity offered by this chapter in order to take his speculative philosophy out of the ethereal sphere of ideas and notions and pull it back down to the earth of social reality. And ever since, authors ranging from Lukács and Brecht to Kojève have unceasingly sought to uncover in the succession of desire, recognition, and struggle the outlines of a historically situatable, political course of events.

However, sharpening Hegel's considerations into concrete and tangible concepts has always meant running the risk of losing sight of this chapter's argumentative core in the face of all this conflictual interaction. After all, Hegel intended to do much more than merely prove that subjects necessarily enter into a struggle with one another as soon as they have realized their mutual dependency. By employing his phenomenological method, he sought to demonstrate that a subject can arrive at a "consciousness" of its own "self" only if it enters into a relationship of "recognition" with another subject. Hegel's aims were of a much more fundamental sort than the historicizing or sociological interpretation cared to realize. He was not primarily interested in elucidating an historical event or instance of conflict, but a transcendental fact which should prove to be a prerequisite of all

human sociality. If a description of a historical–social event is to be found at all in the “Self-Consciousness” chapter, then only after the event that Hegel is truly interested in has already occurred: When the subject has emerged from the self-referentiality of mere desire enough to become aware of its dependence on its fellow human subjects. Hegel thus seeks to do no less than explain the transition from a natural to a spiritual being, from the human animal to the rational subject. The social conflicts that follow in this chapter are meant only as a processual articulation of the implications of this spirituality for human beings.

In what follows I will attempt to reconstruct the decisive step in Hegel’s line of argumentation: The transition from “desire” to “recognition.” That this endeavor is anything but simple can be seen clearly in the long series of interpretations that have arrived at quite willful and even absurd understandings of this text by failing to pay any real attention to Hegel’s own formulations.¹ One cause for this tendency might lie in the quantitative imbalance between the central line of argumentation in the “Self-Consciousness” chapter and its remaining part. Of the nearly forty pages it takes up, Hegel dedicates only one-and-a-half pages to the thesis that the consciousness of one’s self requires the recognition of another self. I want to place these few lines at the center of my reconstruction by (1) clarifying Hegel’s concept of desire, in order to then (2) elucidate his internal transition to the concept of recognition. My interpretation, which focuses strongly on Hegel’s precise wording, will demonstrate that Hegel provides us with more than one argument as to why intersubjective recognition constitutes a necessary prerequisite for attaining self-consciousness.

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I

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes the process by which we arrive at an understanding of the presuppositions of all our knowledge from the perspective of both an observing philosopher and the subjects involved. He seeks to portray every step in the consummation of this understanding in a way that ensures that the steps are understandable not only for the superordinate observer, but also for the agents involved in the process. The chapter begins with the observation that both parties have already learned

¹ This tendency can even be found in the otherwise impressive interpretation offered by Terry Pinkard (1994). My impression is that in his interpretation of this central point in the *Phenomenology*, the transition from “Desire” to “Recognition,” he resorts to trains of thought found in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* as a kind of interpretive crutch.

in connection with the steps previously described to grasp the dependence of the object of their cognition on their own actions. The world of objects no longer faces them externally as a mere “given” that they must make certain to themselves; rather, this world proves to be a “mode” of their own relation to it:

But now there has arisen what did not emerge in these previous relationships [of sense certainty, perception, and understanding], viz. a certainty which is identical with its truth; for the certainty is to itself its own object, and consciousness is to itself the truth. (103, ¶166)

Hegel means by this that the subject can now be aware of itself as an authoritative source of its own knowledge about the world. Whatever “truth” about reality it is capable of calling to mind is due not to its passive registering of reality, but to an active act of consciousness that has antecedently constituted the alleged “object.” In a certain sense, both the observer and the observed subject have thus advanced to an epistemological standpoint already characterized by Kant in his transcendental philosophy. As a result, both parties are faced with the question as to the nature of the knowledge that subjects can have of themselves as creators of true claims. The “self,” whose awareness of itself forms the object of Hegel’s subsequent considerations, is therefore the rational individual, who is already abstractly aware of its constitutive, world-creating cognitive acts.

Hegel then seeks to solve this problem by first having the phenomenological observer anticipate the steps of experience that the involved subject will then take. From the perspective of the observer, it is easy to see the kind of difficulty or insufficiency that marks the beginning of each new stage, such that the observed subject sees itself compelled to proceed to the subsequent process of experience. The conception that this subject would need to have of itself in order to truly possess self-consciousness consists in its own active role as a creator of reality. Yet as long as it is only aware of itself as the “consciousness” that, according to Kant, must be able to accompany all “ideas,” it does not experience itself in its own activity of constituting objects. My awareness of the fact that all of reality is ultimately the content of my mental states is not sufficient to assure myself of my synthesizing and determining activity, rather I conceive of my consciousness just as selectively (*punktuell*) and passively as I do the mental attention that I pay to it in that moment.² For this reason Hegel explicitly criticizes Kant and Fichte in speaking of a mere duplication of consciousness:

² Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a very plausible and clear interpretation of this issue in his essay, “The Dialectic of Self-Consciousness,” in Gadamer (1976).

but since what it [self-consciousness] distinguishes from itself is *only itself as itself*, the difference, as an otherness, is *immediately superseded* for it; the difference is *not*, and it [self-consciousness] is only the motionless tautology of: "I am I"; but since for it the difference does not have the form of *being*, it is *not* self-consciousness. (104, ¶167)

There must be a difference between the type of consciousness that I have of my mental activities and these activities themselves that is not yet present in the initial stage of self-consciousness, for I lack the experience that would make me aware of the fact that, unlike my accompanying and floating attention, the activities of my consciousness possess an active and reality-modifying character. The philosophical observer, who is aware of this insufficiency at the first stage of self-consciousness, thus sketches in advance the type of experience that would be necessary in order to become conscious of this difference. At this very early point, to describe this second stage, Hegel surprisingly uses the notion of "Desire." He thus chooses a term that refers not to a mental but to a corporeal activity. However, before the involved subject can take up such a stance, one that Robert Brandom terms "erotic,"³ it must first learn to grasp reality as something that it can aim at with the purpose of satisfying elementary needs. Hegel uses the notion of "Life" to elucidate this intermediate step, which is meant to explain why observing subjects are motivated to take up a stance of "Desire." This notion consequently occupies a key position in its argumentation, for otherwise we would not be capable of understanding the transition that compels individuals to continue the process of exploring their self-consciousness.

Hegel had already spoken of "Life" in the preceding chapter, in which he introduces the "Understanding" (*Verstand*) as a form of knowledge of objects that is superior to "perception." To understand reality in its totality with the help of understanding as "Life" not only means to ascribe the disassociated elements of perception a unified principle in the form of "Force" (*Kraft*), but also, and more importantly, to learn how to grasp the synthesizing capacity of one's own consciousness in relation to this sort of knowledge. The creation of the category of "Life" therefore represents the turning point that provides the prerequisites for the chapter on self-consciousness, because the subject here starts to interpret the world as being dependent on its own cognition, thereby beginning to develop "self-consciousness." But, surprisingly, the same category of "Life" reappears in this new context at the very point at which the transition is to take place from the initial, empty, or merely duplicated form of self-consciousness

toward a second, superior form. After the observer has finished his act of anticipation (*Vorausschau*), which means that it is only through the stance of "Desire" that the subject can arrive at a better consciousness of its "self," Hegel provides an account of all the implications of the notion of life, an account that is clearly marked as an act of reflection on the part of the involved subject:

What self-consciousness distinguishes from itself as having *being*, also has within itself, in so far as it is posited as being, not merely the character of sense-certainty and perception, but rather it is being that is reflected into itself, and the object of immediate desire is a *living being*. (104, ¶168)

We can conclude from this sentence that Hegel has begun to demonstrate how the observing subject begins to draw consequences from the previously developed notion of "life" for its own self-understanding. While previously it could conceive only of this "self" according to the pattern provided to it by the passive observation of its mental activities, thereby envisioning this "self" as a worldless, non-corporeal and non-situated "I," it now begins to understand itself from the perspective of the opposition to the concept of the "living thing," a concept of which it is already in cognitive possession. What the observer already knows – that the subject must take up a stance of desire in order to arrive at a better and more complete self-consciousness – is something that this subject only gradually calls to mind by applying the notion of life reflexively to its own stance toward the world. It learns that its self is not a placeless, selective consciousness, but that it instead relates to organic reality in active praxis, for it can no longer behave actively, i.e. as a naturally self-reproducing being, towards a world that is full of liveliness. In this sense, we could follow Fred Neuhouser's thought and say that the subject has had a transcendental experience, because it recalls that it was only capable of conceiving of the notion of "Life" because it encountered this object in the practical stance of active access.⁴

Of course, before Hegel can ascribe this kind of experience to his subject, he must develop categorically the concept of "life" up to the point at which its consequences for the individual's relation-to-world arise automatically. After all, it is not merely the external determination of the observer that is to change in the subject's reflection of the notion of life, but an internal conclusion drawn by the observed subject itself. In reflecting on what it is facing in the unity of reality that it has created with the help of the category of "life," the individual cannot avoid having two simultaneous realizations. It observes that the world it has constructed is a totality, which is preserved

through permanent transformation, i.e. a totality of *genii* whose generic qualities are constantly reproduced through the life cycle of its individual members. "It is the whole round of this activity that constitutes Life . . . the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself" (107, ¶171). Yet because only the individual consciousness can be aware of this particularity of the living being, of its genus character, the subject must realize at the same time that it is partially excluded from this life process. As a bearer of consciousness, it seems to belong to a different category from the quality it is aware of as a living genus: "in this *result*, Life points to something other than itself, viz. to consciousness, for which Life exists as this unity, or as genus" (107, ¶172). At this point, where we see the preliminary result of the involved subject's self-application of the notion of life, Hegel's text is especially difficult to understand. The well-known difficulty of not being able to determine precisely whether the determinations he chooses are merely characterizations of the observer or rather results of the observed subject's experiences becomes even more intense here. Hegel formulates the issue as follows:

This other life, however, for which the *genus* as such exists, and which is genus on its own account, viz. self-consciousness, exists in the first instance for self-consciousness only as this simple essence, and has itself as pure "I" for object. In the course of its experience which we are now to consider, this abstract object will enrich itself for the "I" and undergo the unfolding which we have seen in the sphere of life. (107, ¶173)

I take the first part of the first sentence of this compact statement as anticipating the desired result of the observed subject's experience, while the second part of the sentence, which begins with "exists in the first instance," points out the momentary state of its self-consciousness. The involved individual still conceives of its own "self" as pure, non-situated consciousness, but from the perspective of the observer it must understand itself as an individual member of a living genus. Hegel means here that the subject is compelled to make such a transition from pure self-consciousness to "living" self-consciousness in the sense that it must recognize its own liveliness in the liveliness of the reality it constitutes. In a certain sense, it cannot help but discover retrospectively in its own self, through the reflection of its own notion of the organic life process, the natural features which it shares with the reality that is dependent on it. Yet, Hegel skips this step – upon which the subject's own naturalness is discovered in the liveliness of the self-created object – and immediately moves to the stance in which the observed subject reaffirms its newly gained understanding. In the attitude of "desire," the individual assures itself of itself as a living consciousness

which, although it shares the features of life with all of reality, is still superior to reality in that the latter remains dependent on it as consciousness. Desire is therefore a corporeal form of expression in which the subject assures itself that it, as consciousness, possesses living, natural features: “and self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is *desire*” (107, ¶174).

Hegel clearly also intends his notion of “desire,” which outlines the second stage of self-consciousness, as a far-reaching critique of the philosophy of consciousness of his time. He points out that when Kant or Fichte conceives of self-consciousness as the activity by which that consciousness merely observes itself, then we lose sight of more than just consciousness’ active, synthesizing side. Or, in other words, not only is the subject robbed of the chance to recall its own activity of guaranteeing truth, (*wahrheitsverbürgende Aktivität*), rather this conception also suggests that the rational self, of which the subject is seen as possessing knowledge, is free of all natural determinations and thus lacks any kind of organic liveliness. Hegel appears to claim that the philosophy of consciousness denies that the subject has any kind of direct, unmediated experience of its own corporeality. Not least for the purpose of countering the anti-naturalism of his contemporaries, Hegel builds a second stage of “desire” into the process of acquiring self-consciousness. In this stance the subject assures itself of its own biological nature in such a way as to express its superiority over all other beings. By virtue of its capacity to differentiate between what is good or bad for it, it is always certain of the element of its consciousness that separates it from the rest. For Hegel, the confirmation of desires, i.e. the satisfaction of elementary, organic needs, plays a double role with regard to self-consciousness. The subject experiences itself both as a part of nature, because it is involved in the determining and heteronomous “movement of Life,” and as the active organizing center of this life, because it can make essential differentiations in life by virtue of its consciousness. We might even say that Hegel intends his conception of desire to demonstrate just how much humans are always antecedently aware of their “excentric position” (H. Plessner). As long as humans view themselves as need-fulfilling beings and are active in the framework of their desires, they have unmediated knowledge of their double nature, which allows them to stand both inside and outside nature at the same time.

It is important that we attain some clarity as to the role played by “Desire,” because the literature on Hegel often has a tendency to dismiss this stage merely as something negative, as something to be overcome. By

contrast, Hegel appears to me to insist that the experience associated with the satisfaction of our most basic drives gives rise to a kind of self-consciousness that goes far beyond the first form of self-consciousness in terms of content and complexity. Instead of having the subject merely experience itself as selective (*punktuell*) consciousness, which always remains present in all its mental activities, the satisfaction of its desires provides it with the unmediated certainty of a self that is placed excentrically, along with its mental activity, into nature. Because this self-consciousness does justice to humans' biological nature, Hegel is also convinced that we cannot give up the fundamental achievement of this stage of self-consciousness. Whatever other prerequisites are necessary in order to allow the subject to attain a proper awareness of its self, these prerequisites must be contained in a consciousness of being involved as a "living member" in nature. However, the stronger we emphasize what is achieved by "desire," the more urgently we must answer the question as to what causes Hegel to regard this stage of "self-consciousness" as insufficient. He needs but a single brief passage in order to demonstrate the necessity of a further transition. This passage constitutes the next step of our reconstruction.

2

Hardly does Hegel describe the essential importance of desires for self-consciousness before he outlines the reasons for the failure of the associated kind of experience. Unlike his elucidation of the transition from the first stage of self-consciousness to desire, Hegel does not make a clear distinction between the perspective of the observer and that of the participant. He doesn't take up the philosophical standpoint and sketch in advance the aim of the next step of experience in order to then subsequently have the subject itself go through this learning process, rather both processes appear to somehow collapse into one. The starting point for this accelerated, almost rushed description is a summary of desire's accomplishments. In this stance the subject is certain of the "nothingness" or "nullity" of living reality; it views itself in its excentric position as superior to the rest of nature. As a human animal, the appropriate way to express this superiority is to consume the objects of nature in the satisfaction of its desires. Hegel thus remarks that in its desires, the subject "gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*" (107, ¶174). The transition follows immediately in the next sentence, in which Hegel remarks laconically: "In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own

independence" (107, ¶175). A few lines further on, Hegel asserts even more explicitly that self-consciousness is unable to "supersede" its object "by its negative relation" to this object, rather "it produces the object again, and the desire as well" (107, ¶175). It is clear, therefore, that Hegel is convinced of having uncovered an element of self-deception in the stance of desire. The subject deceives itself about itself; one could say that it operates with false conceptions about its relation to the world in believing itself capable of destroying its object through the satisfaction of its needs, through the fulfillment of its desires. However, it is much more difficult to answer the question as to why this sort of self-deception should motivate a transition to a new stage of self-consciousness. It is unclear why the disappointment over the independence of the object should lead to an encounter with the other and to recognition. Nearly all the interpretations of this point in the text that I have seen resort either to metaphorical bridges over this divide or to additional constructions not found in the text itself.⁵

First of all, we need to clarify more precisely just what Hegel takes to be the deficit of desire in relation to self-consciousness. The reference to self-deception can only be seen as a first indication of the direction we must go and not as the solution itself. As readers who follow the directions of the philosophical observer, we already know what kind of self the observed subject is to attain consciousness of after having gone through the previously analyzed stages: this subject must truly realize that it itself is the rational, reality-constructing actor of which it is only abstractly and generally aware at the beginning of our chapter. We could also say that the "I" must arrive at a point where it understands itself in the constructive activity through which it produces an objective world. In the wake of this process of experience, however, a new demand has been made on self-consciousness, one which the subject could not at all have been aware of at the first stage. By placing itself, as a "transcendental" consequence of its own notion of living reality, into nature as a consuming being, the subject must realize that its reality-creating activity is not merely a particularity of its own self, but a fundamental property of human beings in general. By recognizing the genus-character of life, that is, the fact that natural reality exists independent of the continued existence of its individual specimens, the subject is compelled to grasp its own self as an instantiation of an entire genus – the human genus. At the first stage of self-consciousness, self-accompanying

⁵ The interpretation offered by Frederick Neuhouser (1986), which I also followed in an essential point in my first step, is the exception.

observant consciousness, the subject was still very far from this form of self-consciousness. By contrast, at the second stage, rationally compelled by the implications of its own notion of "Life," it at least attained the threshold at which it views itself and its consciousness as being placed into nature as a superior being. Here it conceives of itself as a natural, organic self that has acquired the certainty of being able to destroy the rest of nature by consuming its objects in the process of satisfying desires. Hegel now abruptly claims that this ontological assumption is bound to fail, because natural reality continues to exist despite humans' consumptive acts. However restlessly the subject satisfies its desires, the "process of life" as a whole continues despite the destruction of its individual members. As a result, nature's objects retain their "independence." Thus, strictly speaking, the insufficiency of the experience of "desire" is twofold. First of all, this experience provides the subject with a delusion of allmightiness, leading it to believe that all of reality is but a product of its own individual conscious activity. Second, this prevents the subject from conceiving of itself as a member of a genus. So despite all the advantages that this stage bears for self-consciousness, it must fail due to the fact that it creates a false conception of an omnipotent self. Within the framework of desire, the subject can grasp neither its reality-producing activity nor its own genus-character, because reality in its living totality remains untouched by the activity through which the subject merely satisfies its individual needs.

I have chosen the expressions "almightiness" and "omnipotence" with caution in order to enable comparison with ontogenesis, a comparison that could be helpful at this point. The ingenious psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has described the infant's world of experience as a state in which an infant follows a nearly ontological need to prove to itself the dependence of its environment upon its own intentions. All the acts of destruction by which it mauls the objects it possesses are to prove that reality obeys its all-encompassing power.⁶ What is important for our purposes is not the empirical correctness of these observations, but their possible applicability in elucidating what Hegel actually intends to claim. Hegel seems to want to say the same thing as Winnicott – not in relation to ontogenesis, but certainly with regard to the observed subject's experiences. Both seem to claim that this subject strives, through the need-driven consumption of its environment, to acquire the individual certainty that the reality it faces is on the whole a product of its own mental activity. In the

⁶ Winnicott (1965), 854c154654b2836335053
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course of this striving, however, it is confronted with the fact that, as Hegel puts it, the world retains its “independence” (*Selbstständigkeit*), since its existence is not dependent on the survival of its individual elements. According to Winnicott, the infant exits its omnipotent stage by learning to discover in the form of its mother or other figure of attachment a being that reacts to her destructive acts in different ways. Depending on the situation and on how she is feeling, the mother will react to her child’s attacks sometimes by showing understanding and sometimes disapproval, such that the child eventually learns to accept another source of intentionality besides its own, one to which it must subordinate its grasp of the world. Winnicott’s train of thought can serve as a key for understanding the considerations with which Hegel attempts to motivate a transition from the second to the third stage of self-consciousness.

The sentence immediately following Hegel’s description of the failure of “Desire” is quite possibly the most difficult sentence in the Self-Consciousness chapter. Without any warning from the knowing observer, Hegel claims that in order for the subject to consummate its self-consciousness, it requires another subject that carries out the same negation “within itself” (*an ihm*) that the former had performed only upon natural reality:

On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself (*an ihm*); 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*. (108, ¶175)

Perhaps it would be wise to ask what need Hegel is referring to here – a need that Hegel claims can be satisfied only under the conditions of a mutual negation. He cannot have in mind the organic drive previously expressed in the notion of “Desire” since, after all, this need has already attained fulfillment in the consumption of the natural world. Despite all the disappointment the subject brought upon itself in this stage, it was nevertheless successful in appropriating from reality, according to its own discriminations, the materials that could satisfy its animal or “erotic” needs. So the need that Hegel has in mind must lie deeper and be likewise contained in “Desire,” a need we could call “ontological” due to the fact that it seeks the confirmation of a certain specific conception of the ontological character of reality. In the destructive activity meant to satisfy its desires, the subject sought to confirm its own certainty about the “nothingness” or “nullity” of the world, of its character as a mere product of its own mental activity. Hegel now claims that this previously unfulfilled ontological need can be fulfilled only under the two following conditions: First, the subject must encounter an element of reality that performs this

same act of negation on it; second, the subject must perform the same kind of negation on itself.⁷

It is not difficult to ascertain in this complex thought a reference to the necessity that the observed subject encounter another subject, a second consciousness, for the only “object” itself capable of carrying out a negation is a being that likewise possesses consciousness. In this sense the sentence with which Hegel begins his characterization of the third stage of self-consciousness clearly opens up a new sphere in the subject’s process of experience. The subject not only sees itself confronted with living reality, but encounters in reality an actor that is likewise capable of conscious negation. What is more difficult to understand, however, is Hegel’s remark that this second subject must apparently be capable of performing a negation *an ihm*, i.e. upon the first, observed subject, in order that the desired satisfaction of the ontological need can come about – at least, this is the customary interpretation of the formulation according to which the new “object” carries out a “negation within itself (*an ihm*).” We should not, however, take this thought literally as indicating an act of destruction or need-driven consumption. Instead we should take this “*an ihm*” to mean “*an sich selbst*,” such that Hegel’s formulation would be interpreted as ascribing the second subject a type of negation that it directed at itself, a type of self-negation. This would mean that the first subject encounters the second subject as a being that in the face of the first subject performs a negation upon itself. In any case, this interpretation secures our understanding of why the observed subject’s ontological need can be satisfied only in an encounter with the other: If this second subject carries out a self-negation, a decentering, only because it becomes aware of the first subject, then the first subject is thereby confronted with an element of reality that can change its own state only on the basis of the first subject’s presence. If we refer back to our comparison with Winnicott’s thesis, we could say that the subject encounters in the other a being which, through an act of self-restriction, makes it aware of its own “ontological” dependency.

Hegel, however, does not content himself with a mere mention of this first movement of negation, but accompanies it with a complementary

⁷ It is thus false to speak of a “need for recognition” at this point, as is often done in the works of Kojève and his disciples. The need that Hegel really does seem to assume here by speaking of its “satisfaction” through the subsequently described reciprocal negation is instead the demand of the observed subject to be able to change reality through the activity of its consciousness. In my words, this would be an “ontological” need. For a critique of Kojève’s interpretation, see Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976). For Hegel, “recognition” is thus not the intentional content of a desire or need, but the (social) means by which a subject’s desire that its own reality-modifying activity be capable of being experienced is satisfied.

movement of negation on the part of the observed subject. Not only does the alter ego carry out a kind of self-negation, but also the ego whose experiences are described here. Yet, with this second step, Hegel merely draws the conclusions from what he has already expressed, for if the second subject performs a negation on itself only because it encounters in the form of the first subject a being of the same type, then the first subject must also carry out the same kind of self-negation as soon as it comes into contact with this fellow human being. Hegel, therefore, claims that this type of intersubjective encounter, which he asserts here as a necessary condition of self-consciousness, is strictly reciprocal, for in the moment in which these two subjects encounter one another, both must perform a negation upon themselves, which consists in distancing themselves from what is their own. If we add to this thought Kant's definition of "respect" (*Achtung*), in which he views a demolition (*Abbruch*) or negation of self-love,⁸ then we see clearly for the first time what Hegel sought to claim with his introduction of the intersubjective relation. In the encounter between two subjects, a new sphere of action is opened in the sense that both sides are compelled to restrict their self-seeking drives as soon as they come into contact with one another.⁹ Unlike the act of satisfying needs, in which living reality ultimately remains unchanged, in interaction a spontaneous change of situation occurs within both parties to the event. Ego and alter ego react to each other by restricting or negating their own respective, egocentric desires in such a way that they can encounter each other without the purpose of mere consumption. If we assume further that Hegel was thoroughly aware of the relatedness of his idea of self-negation to Kant's definition of respect, we might even ascribe to him a more far-reaching intention at this point. It appears that he intends to say that the observed subject can attain self-consciousness only with the aid of an experience that already possesses moral content in an elementary sense. It is thus not only in the chapter on "Spirit," in which Hegel explicitly deals with "morality," that Hegel introduces in the form of self-restriction a necessary condition of all morality, but already here in connection with the conditions of self-consciousness. However, this step in Hegel's description takes on a peculiarly automatic, even mechanical character, for it is not the case that both subjects limit their respective desires on the basis of a free decision, rather the act of decentering appears to occur almost as a reflex to the perception of the other. Hegel apparently intends to say that the specific morality of human intersubjectivity already gets underway at this early stage, if only

⁸ Kant (*Groundwork*), 69. ⁹ Hegel (*Encyclopedia III*), §408.

in the form of reciprocal, reactive behavior. Ego and alter ego react to each other at the same time by limiting their egocentric needs, through which they make their further actions dependent on each other's comportment. It is only a small step from this point to an understanding of why Hegel regards this kind of proto-morality as a condition of self-consciousness.

We have already seen that Hegel sees the observed subject's ontological need as being satisfied in the intersubjective encounter. As soon as this subject encounters another human being, it can see in the latter's act of self-negation that a relevant element of reality reacts to its mere presence. The observed subject is capable of ascertaining its own dependence on its own consciousness in the quasi-moral reaction of the other. But Hegel intends self-consciousness to mean more than the ontological insight that reality is a product of one's own conscious self. The observed subject should furthermore be able to perceive itself in the activity in which it produces reality. At this point, Hegel makes use of the reciprocal character of the situation of interaction he has introduced in order to explain the possibility of the perceptibility of one's own activity. It is the self-restricting act of alter ego in which ego can observe first hand the type of activity through which it itself at that very moment effects a real change in the other subject. Both subjects perceive in the other the negative activity through which they produce a reality that they can grasp as their own product. Therefore, we can conclude along with Hegel that the possibility of self-consciousness requires a kind of proto-morality, for only in the moral self-restriction of the other can we recognize the activity in which our own self instantaneously effects a permanent change in the world and even produces a new reality.

For Hegel, however, this consummation of the process of self-consciousness does not lead immediately to a world of commonly shared reason. The creation of this kind of "space of reasons" is something he instead saves up for the result of the struggle that subjects must subsequently engage in due to their realization of their mutual dependency. What, according to Hegel, our subject has learned is something that he formulates almost naturalistically in the sense of the notion of Life so decisive for the stage of "Desire." After the subject has attained self-consciousness due to moral reciprocity, the individual is capable of understanding itself as a living member of the human genus. This subject has become "for itself a genus" (108, ¶176). Thus at this point all three demands Hegel had made of self-consciousness in the course of his reconstruction can be regarded as fulfilled. The subject perceives in one and the same moment in the self-restriction of the other the activity through which it produces (social) reality, and it thereby

understands itself as a member of a genus whose existence is maintained by precisely this type of reciprocity. So it cannot surprise us that Hegel ultimately reserves a single expression for the particularity of this genus: “recognition” – the reciprocal limitation of one’s own, egocentric desires for the benefit of the other.

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