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Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord

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The transition from “Consciousness” to “Self-Consciousness” is one of the *Phenomenology’s* most important turning points. It is also one of the most perplexing, perhaps because it results in not just a new object for phenomenological consideration – consciousness itself – but also a new mode of relating to the world, namely, as a practical rather than purely theoretical subject. Whereas in the previous chapter consciousness’s goal was to know its object – an object it took to be distinct from and independent of itself – self-consciousness’s aim seems fundamentally different: it seeks to “satisfy itself” and to do so through activity that transforms, rather than merely knows, its world.

The first of these differences is easier to grasp than the second. The various configurations of consciousness that occupy the first chapter of the *Phenomenology* are united by the belief that “the true” – the reality each form of consciousness takes to be independent, or self-sufficient (*selbständig*) – is radically distinct from, or “other than,” the subject. Knowledge, on this view, consists in the subject’s representing its object just as it is “in itself,” without importing anything of its own into that representation. “Consciousness,” of course, shows that no such relation between subject and object is possible and that in knowing the world the subject necessarily plays a role in constituting its object as an object of knowledge. The transition to “Self-Consciousness” is motivated by precisely this insight: if the object of knowledge is always an object “for” (constituted as such by) the subject, then the object of knowledge, taken by itself, is not a “true” – which is to say, a wholly independent – reality. This realization necessitates a fundamental revision in the subject’s understanding of what is real and what it is to know the real: its conception of what is self-sufficient must now take into account the subject’s necessary relation to its object, which means that from this point on, “the true” will be located not in an isolated object but in a subject-relating-to-an-object that, only as a whole, is self-sufficient. Self-consciousness, then, is not simply an

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inversion of its predecessor such that now it is the subject, conceived as wholly independent of its object, that appears as “the true.” Rather, the subject now construes itself as the essential, law-giving pole of the subject–object pair and at the same time recognizes its relation to an object – its relation to some reality other than itself – as necessary and not merely incidental to it. How the subject comes to join these two descriptions of itself into a coherent conception of self and world is precisely the tale that “Self-Consciousness” purports to relate.

This account of the end point of “Consciousness” should help to clarify why self-consciousness is inherently practical. If at the end of “Consciousness” the subject regards itself as the true (as the sole source of the norms that bind it in its knowing the world) but at the same time recognizes its necessary relation to something other, then the subject must find a way of maintaining its relation to its other that is consistent with its conception of itself as self-sufficient. Precisely because it is confronted with this task, Hegel understands self-consciousness as a *movement* in which it seeks to assert its sovereign status in relation to its object:

self-consciousness has a dual object: one is the immediate object . . . , which has for it the character of a negative; the other is *itself*, which is the true *essence* and is initially present only in opposition to the first object. Self-consciousness presents itself as the movement in which this opposition is overcome, and its identity with itself becomes for it. (PS 104.24–31/M 105)

It should be clear by now that what Hegel treats under the name ‘self-consciousness’ is quite different from what Kant means by the term. In contrast to his predecessor, Hegel sees a self-conscious subject as characterized by a *goal* – that of demonstrating its sovereignty and self-identity by overcoming the opposition between itself and its other – and the subject’s drive to realize this goal accounts for its practical nature. This begins to make sense once we realize that ‘self-consciousness’ here refers not to the awareness of oneself as a self-identical subject of experience but instead to what could be called a *self-conception*. A subject that holds a self-conception ascribes something more to itself than the merely formal unity that defines theoretical self-consciousness for Kant: a self-conception goes beyond the purely formal thought of “an I that thinks” to include a contentful claim about *who* or *what* a subject takes itself to be. Moreover, a self-conception is a description under which a subject *values* itself; it conveys who or what a subject aspires to be, and so self-conceptions have practical implications for the subjects who hold them: conceiving of oneself as free (in the manner of the subject of “Self-Consciousness”) implies that one will want to act in ways that realize, or express, the value of independent sovereignty. The self-conscious subject as Hegel conceives it, then, is practical rather than merely theoretical because it is characterized by a basic drive – the drive to be completely self-sufficient, free, or constituted only by its own autonomous activity.

Hegel often characterizes the goal of a self-conscious subject as “self-satisfaction.” Taking a moment to clarify this goal is essential to understanding the philosophical project Hegel undertakes in “Self-Consciousness.” The basic idea is that “true” self-consciousness requires more than simply conceiving of oneself

in a certain way, or merely aspiring to be such-and-such; it also requires successfully realizing that conception, along with being aware that one has done so. Hegel's view is that a self-conscious subject cannot satisfy itself until it really "has itself" before itself as the object of its consciousness – that is, until it finds itself realized in the world just as it conceives itself to be. (Hegel sometimes characterizes both *reason* and *freedom* in precisely these terms, as the subject "re-finding itself in the world"; *Enc.* §424Z.) To borrow an example from Sartre: if I think of myself as a brilliant novelist but I write no books, or everything I write is judged mediocre by others, then I may conceive of myself as a brilliant novelist, but I cannot be truly *conscious* of myself as one. My subjective view of who I am is not confirmed in the world outside me – or, as Hegel would put it, my "certainty" fails to correspond to my "truth." Giving objectivity to my self-conception – making it true – constitutes satisfaction because in becoming what I aspire to be, I establish in reality the valued identity I claim for myself in thinking of myself as a great novelist (or a sovereign subject).

"Self-consciousness," then, aims to narrate the "experience" of a subject as it progressively uncovers the conditions under which it is possible for it to realize its conception of itself as free (or self-sufficient) and thereby find itself as such in the world. This account of the necessary conditions of a subject's realizing itself as free is not, however, a straightforwardly transcendental argument of the sort Kant offers in proving the *a priori* validity of the categories of the understanding. Hegel's argument, in contrast to Kant's, is dialectical, which means that it does not begin from a fully determinate conception of what it is for a subject to be free and then, holding that idea fixed, deduce the conditions that must be met if free subjectivity is to be possible. For Hegel, a complete conception of what a subject's freedom consists in emerges only at the end of his argument, and it comes into view only at the moment that the real possibility of self-conscious freedom is established. It is only when we see *that* and *how* free subjectivity is possible that we know precisely what it is for a subject to be free.

We can see how an argument of this sort works if we think of the *Phenomenology* as starting out with only the barest idea of what it is to be free, with what Hegel sometimes calls a "formal definition" of freedom. In both "Consciousness" and "Self-Consciousness" this bare concept of freedom is denoted by the term *Selbständigkeit*, which literally means "self-standingness," though it is often translated as "self-sufficiency" or "independence." These translations are not inappropriate, since the core idea of *Selbständigkeit* is that of a being's not depending on anything "other" than itself – on something alien or external to itself – in order to be what it is. An important part of what Hegel means by a subject's independence is its not depending on anything external to itself in its two central undertakings – its knowing and its willing. In other words, the bare concept of freedom with which the dialectic of "Self-Consciousness" begins includes the idea of a subject whose beliefs and actions are undetermined (or unconstrained) by anything – whether the world or other subjects – that is not itself. This wanting to be completely sovereign with respect to one's own will and belief constitutes for Hegel the defining aim of a self-conscious subject.

There is a further component to the idea of a subject's essential independence. This is the thought that a subject is self-sufficient, not just because it is a sovereign authority – the ultimate source of the norms that bind it – but ontologically as well: a subject depends on nothing other than itself in order to be what it is. The idea that a subject is ontologically self-sufficient is related to Fichte's central claim about the kind of existence that characterizes subjects in distinction to things: for Fichte, the subject just is – is nothing more or other than – its own spontaneous, substrateless activity of self-positing. Of course, this view is itself an appropriation of some of Kant's doctrines, especially his denial that the subject is to be understood as a substance, together with his claim that the mark of a subject is its capacity for conscious activity that is governed by norms immanent to itself rather than determined externally by the objects of consciousness. In these claims the two characteristics of the subject just distinguished – sovereign authority and ontological independence – appear to merge: if the subject is nothing but its own activities (of thinking and willing), and if the norms that govern those activities are immanent to subjectivity rather than derived from something external, then these two species of independence converge.

"Self-Consciousness," then, is Hegel's attempt to answer the question, "Under what conditions can a subject fully satisfy its aspiration to be self-sufficient, or free?," where the criterion for satisfaction is whether a subject can find a stable reflection of itself in the world that corresponds to its conception of itself as free. Accordingly, the dialectical experience observed in "Self-Consciousness" consists in three moments. The first involves a hypothetical subject (the object of our phenomenological observation) imputing to itself a specific conception of self-sufficiency. In the second, the same subject attempts to enact its self-conception, and we phenomenologists observe what realizing such a self-conception in the world entails. That is, we look to see what relations to the world a subject who conceives of itself in this way establishes in its effort to "prove" that it is sovereign in precisely the sense that figures in its self-conception. Finally, we compare what is involved in realizing a specific self-conception with the content of that self-conception in order to see whether the two match up – to see, in other words, whether that self-conception can be realized in a way that is consistent with the specific conception of self-sufficiency it ascribes to a subject. Only when we find that the first two moments are in complete accord is self-consciousness satisfied, and only then can we claim to know both in what a subject's freedom consists and what relations to the external world – both to things and to other subjects – it must have if this freedom is to be real. If, instead, the two moments fail to agree, the dialectic continues by revising the conception of freedom that takes into account what has been learned about freedom by the previous failure, and the succession of moments just described is repeated until self-consciousness's "certainty" accords completely with its "truth."

The experience of self-consciousness begins with the simplest conception of self-sufficiency a subject can attribute to itself: "I am, on my own, fully self-sufficient. Any object I have before me may appear to exist independently (and thus to place external constraints on my knowledge or will), but I am certain that

my object has no independent being (and that I am therefore subject to no such constraints). Moreover, I can *prove* that my object is nothing – that I, not it, am self-sufficient – by showing its very being to depend on me (on my knowledge or will).” This attitude, Hegel claims, is best exemplified by a subject that is driven to negate – to destroy (*PS* 107.30/*M* 109) or consume (*Enc.* §427Z) – a living but unself-conscious “other” with the aim of making true its claim to sovereignty in relation to its dependent, inessential object. In other words, self-consciousness first appears for phenomenological consideration as “desire.”

One of the most perplexing aspects of “Self-Consciousness” is Hegel’s insistence that the object of desire is not just any object but “something living” (*PS* 104.38/*M* 106). The main import of this claim appears to be that, although desire itself remains unaware of this fact – it is apparent only to “us” phenomenologists – desire’s object, life, is in truth not as different from the desiring subject as the latter takes it to be. More precisely, the object of desire can be seen by us to exhibit the same basic structure as self-consciousness itself – with the important difference, of course, that life, unlike self-consciousness, has no *awareness* of its structure or, indeed, any awareness of itself at all. To say that desire and its object share a basic structure is to say that life, too, is (in some sense) self-sufficient and, more specifically, that its self-sufficiency, like self-consciousness’s, consists in its being “reflected into itself” (*PS* 104.32–33/*M* 106) or, equivalently, in its being a “self-developing whole that dissolves its development and in this movement preserves itself as something simple [or self-identical]” (*PS* 107.8–9/*M* 108). Hegel’s point is that, regarded as a whole, life – the totality of living beings – maintains itself only as a self-reproducing cycle, as a process of constant movement in which individual organisms are born, interact with their environment, reproduce, and then pass away. Life, like self-consciousness (and later on *Geist*), counts as a self-identical “unity of distinguished moments” (*PS* 105.1–2/*M* 106) because it preserves itself as what it is only through the activity, interaction, and ultimate passing away of its distinct individual members.

That the object of desire has this complex structure is explained by the principle that earlier moments of Hegel’s dialectic are not simply left behind but preserved in later ones. Desire’s object has the complexity of life, then, because it takes over the complexity of the object of consciousness’s final stage, “Force and Understanding.” The forces that the understanding posits in explaining nature approximate the structure of life because the laws that describe those forces exhibit the same “infinity,” or identity-maintained-through-difference, that characterizes life. (The law of gravitation, for example, explains motion by positing a necessary relation – by establishing an essential “unity” – between “opposing” empirical properties, such as location in space and time, or distance and velocity.)

The more important point here is that even though “we” are aware of the structural similarity between desire and its object, desire itself is not. On the contrary, the subject of desire conceives of itself as fundamentally different from life, and this distinction is central to its understanding of what makes it superior to its object. The individual desiring subject regards itself as wholly self-determining and self-contained, while it sees the living beings that are the objects of its desire as

just the opposite: radically dependent for their existence on other living beings, as well as on their inorganic environment. Life is the realm of need, finitude, and dependence, and for this reason life appears to desiring self-consciousness as the antithesis of its own self-sufficiency. (From this it follows that the desiring subject will have to deny its own groundedness in life in order to maintain its conception of itself as independent. In the later struggle for recognition, this denial will manifest itself in the subject's attitude that its own life is inessential to it, while its sovereignty, in contrast, is everything.) Hegel complicates this picture by adding that the objects of the desiring subject nevertheless *present themselves* to it as self-sufficient; they in some sense – from the point of view of desire – make a claim to being self-sufficient, even though the desiring subject is “certain” they are not. Desire is driven to deny any hint of independent being on the part of its objects because, in its eyes, their being self-sufficient would contradict its own self-sufficiency. Hegel's claim is that at this early stage of self-consciousness, the subject must regard any relation to something other as a threat to its own independence. In desire, the longing for an object points to a lack in the desiring subject – a need for something other in order to achieve satisfaction – that, for it, represents a failure to be wholly self-sufficient and, so, contradicts its self-conception.

For Hegel, then, the subject of desire is a single self-consciousness that conceives of itself, and only itself, as self-sufficient. Formulated differently: the only being to which desire grants the exalted status “subject” is itself, and it regards everything that is not itself as less than a subject, a mere (dependent) thing. It is important to see, however, that desiring self-consciousness takes itself to be the only self-sufficient being not because it thinks the universe just happens to contain only one such being but rather because, given what it takes self-sufficiency to consist in, there could be only one. In other words, the conception of self-sufficiency with which Hegel's dialectic begins is one that takes a free subject to be absolute, or unconditioned (both are alternative expressions for ‘self-sufficient’) in the sense of being free from – unbound by – all constraints whatsoever on its doing and believing. The purely desiring subject, then, takes its sovereignty to consist in recognizing no law or authority beyond its own immediate desires.

Understanding the two reasons for desire's failure enables us to explain the next move in the dialectic of self-consciousness, the transition from desire to the search for recognition. This transition is the site of one of the most influential arguments of Hegel's entire corpus. Hegel characterizes this relation as follows:

certain of the nothingness of [its] other, [the desiring subject] explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the self-sufficient object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty. (PS 107.29–31/M 109)

Desire attempts to satisfy itself, then, by enacting the attitude: “I am the only self-sufficient being; every other being exists only ‘for me’.” Although Hegel describes desire as seeking the destruction of its object, this is potentially misleading. What desire seeks, more precisely, is the complete negation of every claim to self-sufficiency other than its own; it seeks to show that everything other “counts

as nothing,” “has no *true* reality,” and “does not *deserve* to exist for itself” (*Enc.* §426 & Z; emphasis added). Desire’s aim, in other words, is to show not that nothing else *exists*, but that nothing else has the kind of being that imposes constraints on it (on its will and belief).

Following our earlier account of the *Phenomenology’s* method, we should expect to find next an argument to the effect that, given its self-conception and the relation to the world that conception implies, desire is unable to satisfy itself (unable to find itself realized in the world just as it conceives itself to be). This is precisely what the following passage asserts:

Desire and the certainty of itself obtained in desire’s satisfaction are conditioned by the object, for that self-certainty comes to be through the superseding (*aufheben*) of this other: in order for this supersession to be, the other must be. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation [to the object], is unable to supersede the object; instead, because of that relation it produces the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire. (*PS* 107.34–39/M 109)

This passage suggests two distinct but compatible accounts of why desire’s project is self-contradictory, that is, two reasons why what desiring self-consciousness must do in order to prove itself independent belies the conception of independence it ascribes to itself. Understanding each claim is essential if we are to grasp the necessity of the move to the next configuration of self-consciousness, in which desire becomes a subject that seeks recognition from another subject.

According to one line of thought, desire is caught in a performative contradiction: in attempting to prove itself self-sufficient, it is compelled to grant an importance to the objects it thinks itself superior to that its self-conception cannot admit. In conceiving of itself as independent, the desiring subject takes itself to stand above all other beings (whose desires and claims count for it as nothing), but in proving its exalted status it depends on the very beings it claims to be both above and independent of. The thought here is that because desire needs to make its claim for itself true – needs to find itself in the world just as it conceives of itself – it can find satisfaction only by relating to a realm of otherness (the external world) in which it must negate others’ claims to independent status. In relying on these others in order to sustain its picture of itself, however, desiring self-consciousness shows itself not to possess the self-sufficiency it aspires to, since it depends on something other than itself in order to realize its conception of what it essentially is. Or, in language closer to Hegel’s own: since desire’s satisfaction is conditioned by its other, that other is essential to it; this, however, contradicts desire’s certainty that it is absolutely self-sufficient.

The second reason desire’s predicament is contradictory is that the only satisfaction available to it is temporary, or fleeting, and for this reason it is trapped in an endlessly repeating cycle that “*never* . . . reaches its goal” (*Enc.* §428Z). The feature of desire’s situation singled out here as responsible for its failure is the purely negative character of the relation desire establishes to its object. Hegel’s claim is that once desire completely negates, or destroys, its object, the very being that

was to provide a reflection of its self-sufficient status no longer exists, and with the object's disappearance all worldly evidence of the subject's exalted status has disappeared as well.¹ Due to its purely negative relation to its object, then, the very moment at which Desire satisfies itself is also the moment at which it loses what it sought. This loss engenders the need to seek out a new object in relation to which self-consciousness can prove its self-sufficiency, and so, as long as it continues to conceive of self-sufficiency in the same way, it is caught in an unending cycle of satisfaction and emptiness, followed by the renewed search for another object in relation to which it can once again demonstrate its sovereignty. According to this second line of thought, then, desire is unable to achieve satisfaction because it cannot find in the world any stable reflection of the kind of independence it seeks.

This argument seems to depend on the idea that, once negated, desire's *object* ceases to exist. But if we construe the object's demonstrated nothingness less literally – as the claim that the negated object *counts* as nothing, that it imposes no constraints on desire's ends – Hegel's claim still holds: once the object is annihilated in the sense that its self-sufficiency is completely denied, there is nothing left in desire's world with sufficient standing (or "being") to reflect the value that desire takes itself to have. Desire then loses interest in its demeaned object and is compelled to seek confirmation in another, in some object that makes a credible claim to self-sufficiency and, so, is worthy of desire's negation. Hegel's thought here can be made more concrete if we think of desire's attitude as exemplified, if imperfectly,² by a compulsive seducer who has a conception of his own elevated standing that he attempts to express, or prove, by ruining – destroying the honor of – the victims of his seduction. The seducer's attitude to his objects parallels desire's insofar as he attempts to prove his elevated status in relation to an other that counts for him, roughly, as a thing. More precisely, the seducer's object initially presents itself as a being of a certain standing – a person of honor – and his satisfaction consists in completely abolishing that claim by destroying his object's honor; the moment the seduced succumbs to the seducer's desire, she or he ceases to exist as a subject of value. The seducer, then, embodies the attitude "I am everything (everything that counts), and my objects are nothing," but when he enacts this self-conception, he shows that his being everything – his actually proving it – depends on there being some other being with its own claim to self-sufficiency for him to negate. The seducer shows himself to be less self-sufficient than he takes himself to be – this was the first claim characterized above – but it is also the case – this is the second claim – that satisfaction for the seducer can be only momentary. Once his destroyed object stands before him, it ceases to be of use to his project of self-assertion since, completely void of any claim to standing, it can no longer serve as a being in relation to which the seducer can establish his own value; once his object has been reduced to a nothing, it is no longer suitable for the task of reflecting the value of a self-sufficient subject.

The next move in the dialectic of self-consciousness, the transition from desire to the search for recognition, contains one of the most influential arguments of Hegel's entire corpus. Its implicit claim is that intersubjectivity – standing in rela-

tions of a certain kind to other subjects – is a necessary condition of self-consciousness (of full, objectively confirmed knowledge of oneself as a self-sufficient subject). This point could also be formulated as the claim that there can be no subject without intersubjectivity or, as Hegel puts it, that self-consciousness exists only as “an I that is a we and a we that is an I” (PS 108.39/M 110). The essential claim here is that only another subject can provide self-consciousness with a satisfying confirmation of its own self-sufficiency; the key to reconstructing Hegel’s argument lies in understanding how taking another subject as one’s object remedies the dual failings of desire.

Progressing beyond the standpoint of desire requires us to ask what phenomenological experience has taught us about what an object must be like if it is to satisfy a subject. What we have learned in this regard follows directly from the two deficiencies of desire. First, we know now that a satisfied subject cannot avoid depending in some manner on something external to itself, given its need to prove its self-sufficiency in the world. This means that a satisfying object must be one that a subject can depend on in such a way that its dependence does not undermine its claim to self-sufficiency; that is, the subject must find an object it can depend on to reflect its status without degrading itself in the process, thereby losing the very status it seeks to prove. (This sounds like a *logically* contradictory demand, and so it is, until later in the dialectic the subject revises its conception of what it is to be self-sufficient.) Second, in order to satisfy a subject, an object must be capable of providing lasting, not merely temporary, satisfaction; it must be able to endure negation (to reflect the value of another) without itself disappearing or being reduced to nothing.

Hegel claims that only another subject meets both of these criteria, because only a subject is able to negate itself (PS 108.4–5/M 109). A subject negates itself and exists “for another” whenever it recognizes another subject as a being of value whose desires or beliefs in some way “count,” or impose constraints on it. Why, though, does a subject’s capacity for self-negation offer the way out of desire’s conundrum? In the first place, negating oneself by recognizing another need not imply self-immolation, either literally or metaphorically. In acknowledging the standing of another subject, one does not (normally) cease to exist, and, more important for Hegel’s purposes, by undertaking that negation oneself, one maintains a certain dignity or status even as one stands there negated “for another.” This is because even though the self-negating subject is negated, it is also the author of its negated condition, and so in a certain sense it remains *self-determining* (PS 108.7, 23/M 109, 110). Clearly, this responds to the second problem the desiring subject encountered – a self-negating object can endure negation with its value-affirming capacities intact – but, less obviously, it is also relevant to the first.

It may seem that with regard to the first of desire’s problems – how it can depend on something other to prove its independence without thereby undermining its claim to be self-sufficient – seeking recognition from another subject represents no advance. For in seeking recognition, a subject still depends on something other (on a numerically distinct individual) in order to achieve self-consciousness.

It appears, then, that it is impossible for such a subject both to satisfy itself and to avoid depending on something other. It is important to see, however, that self-consciousness's new object differs from the object of desire in an important respect that ameliorates the problem the desiring subject encountered in relying on thing-like objects to prove its self-sufficiency. The difference is that now, in seeking recognition, the subject implicitly acknowledges that its object – another subject – also has a standing above that of mere things. To say that a subject seeks recognition from its counterpart implies that it recognizes the latter as the kind of being that is capable of determining itself to exist “for another,” and thus as having the same capacities that characterize subjectivity – and hence the elevated status – that it takes itself to have. This addresses desire's problem of reconciling dependence with self-sufficiency in that even though the subject now depends on a being numerically distinct from itself, its dependence does not degrade it as desire's did since the being it depends on is one it regards as belonging to the same honored species as itself. The subject's tacit recognition of its *generic identity* with the object from which it seeks recognition marks the beginning (though only the beginning) of the constitution of a collective subject – the consciousness of a we – that Hegel claims to be a condition of self-consciousness. The idea to be developed more fully as the dialectic progresses – an idea that has its source in Rousseau's account of how having a general will makes us free – is that once a subject begins to think of itself as part of a we, then in depending on the others that also constitute that “we,” that subject depends only on itself (on a collective subject it identifies with). To anticipate the result of what will be a very long story, the problem of self-consciousness's dependence on an alien other will be solved not by retreating from the ideal of self-sufficiency, nor by eschewing all dependence on others, but instead by an *identification* with the object depended on that abolishes not the object itself but only its otherness.

The progress made thus far in the dialectic of self-consciousness yields not just insight into the kind of object a subject must relate to in order to achieve satisfaction but also a conceptual revision of the ideal the subject aspires to realize. A crucial lesson that desire's experience has taught us is that true self-sufficiency for a subject – self-sufficiency that affords full and stable satisfaction – does not consist in absolute independence from everything other but involves instead dependence on other (numerically distinct) subjects that one also recognizes as in some sense oneself. In other words, the quest for recognition counts as a step forward for self-consciousness only if one assumes a corresponding revision in its understanding of what a subject's claim to be self-sufficient requires: a subject's dependence on an other is compatible with a kind of self-sufficiency as long as that subject can see the being it depends on as sufficiently like itself (as of the same exalted type – subject rather than mere thing – that it takes itself to be). Insofar as the subject “identifies” with the object it requires for its satisfaction, it depends only on itself, which is to say: on an object of the same species as itself, the defining characteristic of which – the capacity to negate itself – allows dependence on such an object not to entail a degradation of the status the subject seeking recognition claims for itself. For us phenomenologists, however, the ideal of self-sufficiency has

been expanded even further. For we can see – though the individual subjects we are about to observe in their search for recognition still cannot – that once desire has been replaced by the quest for recognition, complete self-sufficiency cannot reside in an individual subject but only in the whole ensemble of subjects, together with the relations they establish among themselves in seeking to satisfy their need for recognition. It is, in other words, the we not the I that is truly self-sufficient here, though as later developments will show, the fully self-sufficient we is one that also accords a significant measure of (relative) self-sufficiency to each of its individual I's.

In his introduction to “Self-Sufficiency and Non-Self Sufficiency of Self-Consciousness” (*PS* 109.8–110.29/*M* 111–12), Hegel analyzes the complicated dynamic that is always at play among subjects once there are at least two self-consciousnesses, each seeking recognition from the other. The starting point of this analysis is the realization that once a subject seeks proof of its self-sufficiency through recognition, it can no longer fulfill its aspiration without at the same time existing “outside itself,” as an object for another subject. This truth about the quest for recognition is the source of the fundamental “ambiguity” – the dual significance of every action – that pervades all recognitive relationships and that generates much of the back-and-forth of the dialectic that follows.

One source of dual significance is that the subject who succeeds in finding recognition from another “has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being” (*PS* 109.20–21/*M* 111). A recognized subject finds in the world a confirmation of what it takes itself to be, but in doing so it has (from its point of view) also surrendered its sovereignty, since insofar as it finds recognition, it cedes authority to a point of view other than its own, namely, the value-conferring gaze of its other. This relinquishing of absolute sovereignty evokes in the subject an urge to repudiate the other's authority to confer value on it (*PS* 109.24–27/*M* 111) – perhaps by retreating, perhaps by denying in some way the independent authority of the other – but acting on this impulse only makes it impossible for its other to provide it with the recognition it seeks, thereby precluding its own satisfaction. In other words, a subject in search of recognition seeks to be recognized by an other as self-sufficient, but in order for that recognition to count for it, it needs to see the being from which the recognition comes as possessing sufficient authority (sovereignty) to confer on it the status it seeks. This point illustrates one aspect of the dual significance possessed by every attempt to be recognized: whatever one recognition-seeking subject does to its counterpart, it in effect does also to itself. Since it is precisely in the other subject that it seeks to find a confirmatory picture of what it takes itself to be – since it “sees. . . *itself* in the *other*” (*PS* 109.22–23/*M* 111) – how it treats its other ultimately affects the kind of reflection of itself it is able to find in the world.

A second source of dual significance enters the picture when one notes the further complication that everything a recognition-seeking subject does “is as much *its doing* as *the doing of the other*” (*PS* 110.3–4/*M* 112). Hegel is not referring here to the fact that the being from which the first subject seeks recognition is itself a (second) subject that seeks the same thing from the first. Instead, he is

drawing our attention to a feature of the quest for recognition that can be seen when viewed still from the perspective of only one subject's aim. What is at issue here is hinted at in Hegel's suggestion that everything the first subject does in seeking recognition corresponds to a demand it simultaneously makes of its counterpart that it (the second subject) also act in a certain way. This type of dual significance is said to reflect the fact that, given the aim of recognition, "a merely one-sided doing would be useless" (*PS* 110.12/*M* 112). And all of this, Hegel says, is bound up with the circumstance that, once recognition is its aim, self-consciousness's object is fundamentally different from the object of desire. That is, in distinction to its earlier manifestation, self-consciousness now needs to see its other as "just as self-sufficient, self-enclosed" as itself – as a being of which it is true that "there is nothing in it that is not there [through its own doing]" (*PS* 110.4–5/*M* 112). This second dual significance derives, then, from the familiar point that the recognition-seeking subject cannot find satisfaction merely by imposing a negated status upon its other (since doing so would violate the self-standingness it needs to find in its object so that its dependence on that other does not involve depending on something lower than itself). If the other's negated status is to count as recognition, the subject must get its other to *negate itself*; every act the first subject undertakes in seeking recognition must elicit a corresponding, freely undertaken act by the second. Any instance of recognition, then, includes at once the first subject's act of demanding recognition and the second's free acquiescence to that demand; two subjects must act in concert for even a single (one-sided) act of recognition to occur.

These points about the dual significance of cognitive interactions become clearer in the following paragraphs, where the abstract schema of recognition (*PS* 109.8–110.29/*M* 111–12) assumes its first concrete shape in the struggle unto death. Hegel introduces the latter by recalling that at this stage in its development self-consciousness has "doubled" since, as we have seen, a single subject "achieves satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (*PS* 108.13–14/*M* 110). Each of the subjects we are about to observe begins by taking its character as pure self-consciousness – its "simple being-for-self" in "exclusion of everything other" (*PS* 110.35–36/*M* 113) – as its essential property, as that which it must prove itself to be in order to find satisfaction. Of course, in fact each exists as something more than pure self-consciousness as well, for the very possibility of their meeting in the world depends on their being present to each other as bodies and, so, on their immersion in life and the realm of material dependence. This fact of embodiment, together with the entirely negative conception of self-sufficiency that each maintains – where self-sufficiency is taken to consist in *not* being defined by any particular relation to an other – means that each subject is motivated to prove, both to itself and to its other, that nothing material, not even its own body (or life), is essential to it. At this point in the dialectic, seeking recognition by risking its life appears to self-consciousness as the only way of proving its self-sufficiency.

If we take seriously the dual significance of cognitive interactions described above, then each subject's risking of its life must be understood as an attempt not only to demonstrate that it has no attachment to life but also to elicit as a free

response in its other an acknowledgment of its sovereign status. In addition, since whatever one subject does to its counterpart it does also to itself, each – in a single act with dual significance – both risks its own life and goes after the life of its other. This is because each participant in the struggle seeks to prove itself *as well as its other*: each “must raise its self-certainty. . . to truth [both] in the other and in itself” (PS 111.28–29/M 114). As we know from Hegel’s account of the basic structure of recognition, each dueling subject must set out to risk its own life as well as to evoke the same action in its opponent, since in order to be satisfied it must be able to see in its recognizer a being worthy of conferring the sovereign status it seeks (a being willing to risk its own life in pursuit of recognized sovereignty).

It is important to note that even though every act of recognition involves some degree of reciprocity (since my seeking recognition from you implies that I regard you as sufficiently worthy for your recognition to count), *reciprocal* recognition need not be *equal*. Indeed, each participant in the struggle unto death seeks to be recognized by its counterpart not as an equal but as the only “absolute” subject. (That a self-sufficient subject must be a single individual, distinguished from everything other, follows from the negatively defined self-conception, described above, that self-consciousness possesses at this point in its development.) In other words, each subject seeks the total (self-)negation of its other, though not in a sense that involves obliterating the existence, or even the value-conferring capacity, of its other. Instead, each wants its counterpart freely to enact the attitude: “you count for everything, I for nothing.” More precisely, the aim of each is to be recognized (by a being it in turn recognizes as a subject, capable of self-negation) as absolute in the sense that it – its particular desiring and believing – is the unconditional authority for the desiring and believing of any subject.

The struggle unto death can end in a variety of ways, but the only phenomenologically productive outcome occurs when, in the face of death, one of the two combatants embraces life as more essential to it than its honor and submits to the other in order not to die. The result in this case is

two opposed configurations of consciousness: one, a self-sufficient consciousness for whom being-for-self is essential; the other, an un-self-sufficient consciousness for whom life, or being-for-another, is essential. The former is *lord*, the latter *bondsman*. (PS 112.30–33/M 115)

With this begins the most influential section of the *Phenomenology*, perhaps of Hegel’s entire corpus: the so-called master–slave dialectic.³

Let us begin, as Hegel does, by considering what the lord has gained in his victory over the bondsman. The lord’s most obvious achievement is that his self-conception as a self-sufficient subject is no longer merely “certain” but “true,” which is to say: his status as a sovereign subject is now recognized by another consciousness that, through its obedience, continually proves the authority of the lord’s desires. Less obvious but just as significant, the lord has achieved a kind of mastery over “being” – the world of things – as well. For, first, in holding out in the struggle unto death, the lord demonstrated his superiority to life (which is

precisely the basis of the bondsman's recognition, since he, unlike the lord, proved unable to deny his tie to life). Second, in consuming the objects prepared for him by the bondsman, the lord achieves a mastery over things that recalls but also improves upon desire's quest for the same. Because the lord's relation to the things he consumes is mediated by the bondsman – the bondsman must work on things before they can be enjoyed – the lord is able to accomplish the pure negation of things that desire strove for, but in a more satisfying way. The reason Hegel gives for this is that since the bondsman works on the things to make them suitable for human consumption, it is he, not the lord, who must interact with and accommodate the self-sufficiency of things; the lord, in contrast, is able to “enjoy the thing purely” and “to be done with the thing and satisfy himself in his enjoyment” (PS 113.19–20, 23/M 116). But our previous account of the failings of desire suggests another reason the lord's relation to things is more satisfying than desire's: for the lord, unlike desire, the consumption of things does not result in the loss of a worldly confirmation of his sovereign status. The lord's satisfaction is more enduring than desire's because even when his objects have been consumed, there remains in the world another subject that continues to bear witness to his exalted standing.⁴

Despite these achievements of the lord, Hegel famously holds that the bondsman, not the lord, holds the key to the future development of self-sufficient subjectivity. His argument for this appeals to three “moments” of the bondsman's situation: fear, labor, and obedience (or service). In fact, however, there is a fourth advantage⁵ Hegel mentions before any of these: the bondsman has before him “*self-sufficient . . . consciousness as the truth*, though it is a truth that exists *for the bondsman*, not yet *in him*” (PS 114.18–19/M 117). Self-sufficient subjectivity constitutes the bondsman's “truth” in that he, unlike his counterpart, has constantly before his eyes, in the lord, a concrete picture of what it is to be a sovereign subject, where one's own will and point of view carry authority for other subjects. In interacting with his superior, the bondsman experiences sovereign subjectivity – from the outside, as it were – and that sovereignty counts for him as “essential.” Even though the bondsman does not yet see self-sufficiency as his own potential attribute, his relationship to the lord provides him with a living exemplar of sovereignty that, however incomplete, will function as a guiding ideal in his future spiritual development.

For Hegel the possibility of that development depends on the circumstance that, even though the bondsman does not yet regard himself as a sovereign subject, his interaction with the lord transforms him, without his knowledge, in ways that will enable him to realize a more complete form of self-sufficiency than the lord is capable of. This is what Hegel means when he says that “the truth of . . . *being-for-self* belongs *implicitly* [or potentially]” to the bondsman (PS 114.19–20/M 117). It is precisely his fear, obedience, and labor that explain why self-sufficient subjectivity exists already *in* the bondsman, even though he remains unaware of that potential.

The fear at issue here is not the bondsman's fear of his particular lord but his fear of the absolute lord, death. Here it is relevant to recall that the bondsman's

relation to the lord is grounded in his own relation to being: precisely because he was unable to renounce his attachment to life, the bondsman emerged from the struggle unto death as the lord's servant. Yet in experiencing this fear the bondsman acquires a capacity that is lacking in the lord but essential to self-sufficient subjectivity, the capacity for "absolute negativity." This is because in confronting the possibility of his own death, the bondsman feared not just the loss of this or that particular quality but rather "for his entire being" (*PS* 114.22–23/*M* 117). In the fear of death everything about a person that previously seemed fixed and stable is shaken loose and dissolved; every particular property that seemed to define that person now ceases to matter in relation to one supreme, overriding value: remaining alive. What occurs in the fear of death, then, is a kind of "universal dissolution" – an absolute negating – of everything one presently is that Hegel takes to be the essence of free subjectivity. A fully self-sufficient subject – one for which "there is nothing in it that is not the result of its own doing" (*PS* 110.5/*M* 112) – must be able to step back from every one of its merely given properties⁶ in order to ask whether it is *good* that it have such a property. The bondsman, in effect, judges all his particular qualities from the perspective of a supreme value, and in this respect he has advanced beyond the master. Insofar as he remains a bondsman, however, his criterion of the good is mere life. If he is to become truly self-sufficient, that criterion must eventually be replaced by the ideal of sovereign subjectivity – a more adequate version of it – that he now sees and values in the master but not yet in himself.

By distinguishing the bondsman's obedience from his labor, Hegel draws our attention to the fact that the bondsman's labor is undertaken *for another*, that it is activity determined by the dictates of an external will. Hegel says very little about the significance of this aspect of the bondsman's situation, but his allusion to the "discipline of service" (*PS* 115.29/*M* 119) makes it possible to guess the main thrust of his idea:⁷ being subject to the discipline of an external authority is necessary for acquiring the capacity for self-discipline that true sovereignty requires. In serving his lord the bondsman learns to say no to his own particular, merely natural desires and to act instead for the sake of something higher, for ends that emanate from the will of a subject that he recognizes as self-sufficient and therefore as authoritative. The bondsman's obedience, then, develops in him the capacity (ultimately) to be master over *himself*; where self-mastery, or self-determination, consists in subjecting one's will – subordinating one's particular, given desires – to the authority of a higher ideal that in some sense derives from oneself. Of course, insofar as he remains a servant, the bondsman fails to achieve self-determination, for the higher ends he serves lack universality, which is to say: he labors to satisfy the merely particular and arbitrary ends of another individual, not for the sake of absolute, genuinely authoritative ends, those of freedom itself.

Hegel's discussion of the bondsman's labor is both more extensive and more celebrated than that of fear and obedience. It can be divided into two claims, one concerning the "positive" significance of labor, the other about labor's "negative" import (*PS* 115.12–14/*M* 118). The first of these claims is easier to locate and

understand. It turns on the idea that the bondsman's labor provides him with a more satisfying relation to the realm of being than is possible either for the lord or, earlier, for desire. The bondsman's relation to being is superior to desire's because he negates (changes) the things he works on in a way that does not entail their annihilation. Labor negates things by forming them (and forming them in accordance with a subjective end), but when it has finished, its objects have not ceased to exist but instead remain standing in the world as objective testimony to the laborer's subjectivity. The bondsman refashions the given world according to his own plan (even though this plan is determined ultimately by the ends of his master), and in doing so, he inscribes his subjectivity into the world of things and finds therein an objective reflection of his sovereignty as a subject – of his authority to “give laws” to the world of objects. Since the master, in contrast, merely “enjoys” but does not work for the objects of his enjoyment, he is unable to experience himself as a fully self-sufficient subject, one with the ability to infuse the world, in all its particularity, with its own mark.

The second, negative significance of labor finds expression in Hegel's claim that labor negates, or “works away,” the first moment of the bondsman's situation, his fear of death (*PS* 115.14/*M* 118). The key to understanding this point lies in Hegel's statement at the end of the previous paragraph that “through its labor, consciousness comes to see self-sufficient being *as itself*” (*PS* 115.9–11/*M* 118). Hegel's claim here is that the bondsman's labor accomplishes something more than providing him with objective evidence of his subjectivity; it also, by reforming the world of things, makes that world less foreign to him. Instead of regarding the realm of things as hostile and alien, he comes to see it “as himself,” as a realm that accommodates rather than thwarts the aspirations of subjectivity.

Still, even if labor diminishes the foreignness of being, how does that negate the fear of death? Hegel's answer is both direct and puzzling: “this objective *negative* [i.e. the form of being that labor negates] is precisely the foreign being in the face of which servile consciousness trembled” (*PS* 115.16–17/*M* 118). The puzzle this answer poses is why the bondsman's fear of *death* is to be equated with a fear of alien *being*. It will help to recall that at the moment in which the future bondsman first experienced the fear of death, the world of things had for him (as for the future lord) the significance of something alien. That is, both contestants in the struggle for recognition regarded membership in that world as antithetical to their aspiration to be a subject since, for them, to view oneself as connected essentially to the material world – to something “other” – was to lose one's defining character of self-sufficiency. In saying that alien being terrified the future bondsman, Hegel implies that the fear experienced in the struggle unto death is in fact twofold: a fear of dying and a fear of losing one's self (one's status as a subject). As we have seen, the bondsman's labor strips being of its alien character by demonstrating that, in receiving the form imposed on it by the bondsman, the material world can accommodate and reflect subjectivity rather than merely oppose it. But in addition to proving that self-sufficient subjectivity can be reconciled with an essential relation to things, this accomplishment negates the bondsman's fear of death. For the bondsman can see now that the material world's receptivity to his

formative activity also immortalizes his subjectivity, since it enables the latter to acquire existence in a world that is more enduring than any individual self-consciousness can be. Enshrining his subjectivity in the realm of being allows what is most essential to the bondsman to survive his physical death, and realizing this makes the prospect of physical death less terrifying. This marks an important spiritual advance for self-consciousness because once a subject is no longer dominated by the fear of death, it is freer to do what a self-sufficient subject must: determine its actions in such a way that all material values – whether pleasure or life itself – are subordinated to the higher, spiritual end of freedom.

In introducing the next stage of the dialectic, Hegel picks out two moments of lordship and bondage as principal advancements in the development of self-sufficient subjectivity: first, that the bondsman has come to see an objectified reflection of his subjective activity in the things he has formed and, second, that he sees in the lord a concrete example of a consciousness that takes itself to be, and is recognized as, a sovereign subject (*PS* 116.15–17/*M* 119). The problem – and the impetus for future development – is that these two moments are not yet integrated. The configurations of self-consciousness that follow represent different attempts to synthesize these two moments of the bondsman–lord relation into a single consciousness. From the experience we have observed in the beginning sections of “Self-Consciousness” we know something about what such a synthesis will involve: a fully self-sufficient subject must be able to see itself – evidence of its own subjectivity – permeate the other that it necessarily relates to (both the world of things and in its relations to other subjects). One condition of achieving satisfaction in this undertaking is that individual subjects renounce their claim to absolute sovereignty (qua individuals) and instead identify themselves with a collective will (or perspective) that is universal in two senses: it is constituted by taking account of, and according equal value to, the perspectives of all individual subjects that compose it; and it takes as its ultimate authority not the given, natural ends of pleasure or life but a single, overriding spiritual value, the realization of freedom.

Notes

- 1 This line of argument is confirmed later, when Hegel explains why labor represents a more satisfying relation to objects than desire: “desire reserved for itself the pure negating of the object and thereby an unalloyed feeling of self. But that is why this satisfaction is itself merely fleeting, for it lacks the side of objectivity, or permanence” (*PS* 114.39–115.3/*M* 118).
- 2 One obvious disanalogy is that the seducer’s object is another person, not a mere living thing. But the analogy remains enlightening insofar as the seducer in effect regards his object as a thing, as something that imposes no constraints on his own desire.
- 3 Since ‘lord’ and ‘bondsman’ are more accurate translations of *Herr* and *Knecht* than the familiar ‘master’ and ‘slave’, I shall use the former pair here.
- 4 This interpretation is supported by a later passage which emphasizes the “disappearing,” or fleeting, nature of desire’s satisfaction and contrasts it with the lord’s experience of the thing (*PS* 114.39–115.3/*M* 118).

- 5 This talk of advantages should not be understood as implying that the bondsman is “better off” than the lord. The bondsman is better situated only from the perspective of the future developments in subjectivity that his oppressed condition makes possible.
- 6 This is the moment of universality ascribed to the free will in *PR*, §5.
- 7 Hegel is more explicit about the significance of obedience at *Enc.* §435Z.

Further Reading

- Neuhouser, F. (1986) “Deducing Desire and Recognition in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24.2: 243–62.
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