

WHY WE FIGHT: HEGEL'S 'STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION' REVISITED

ABSTRACT: My goal in this paper is to counter an increasingly common interpretation of the most famous moment in Hegel's thought - the struggle for recognition. Specifically, through a close reading of the movement from self-conscious desire to the moment of struggle, I seek to refute three key claims: a) that self-consciousness finds itself, *qua* determining center, challenged by another desire, b) that self-consciousness responds to this challenge by seeking to somehow subjugate the other as determining desire, and c) that self-consciousness risks its own life primarily as a consequence of seeking the death of the other. I close with some (somewhat speculative) comments on the import of this reversal for understanding the role of recognition in Hegel's thought.

KEYWORDS: Hegel: recognition

My goal in this paper is to counter an increasingly common interpretation of the most famous moment in Hegel's thought—the struggle for recognition. The general structure of this reading is succinctly presented in a recent book by John Russon:

The thesis of the stance of desire is that it is the absolute determining ground of experience. [...] Desire meets its insurmountable limit, though, when it is challenged by another desire like itself [i.e., by] another stance that announces itself as desire as such, the one and only reality. [...] When two absolute desires meet, they cannot meet [...] for the logic of each is such as to undermine the logic of the other: each claims to be the one who determines, and each therefore meets in the other the impossibility of effecting this stance of agency. / The stance of desire is committed to determining the situation. [...] Desire, therefore, must try to determine the other, must oppose every effort of the other to determine, must oppose the other absolutely. In facing another desire, then,

desire must desire the obliteration of that desire. Desire, therefore, seeks the death of the other desire.¹

On this reading, self-consciousness understands itself essentially to be the determining center of reality. As such, when it finds itself faced with another desiring subject, self-consciousness has its own self-understanding challenged, as it confronts another such determining center. Unable to resolve this conflict between its desire to determine the other and the other's desire to determine it, each self-consciousness manifests itself as a "particular individual [...] who strives to impose himself" on the other,² and ultimately eliminate the other as a desiring being, thereby preserving itself as determining center. Such an imposition, of course, is also sought by the other in return, and thus each self-consciousness realizes that, as Quentin Lauer puts it, "there is no negating the life of another without risking one's own life".³ The struggle, then, arises from two particular self-consciousnesses, each of whom, qua particular, first desires to somehow subjugate or eliminate the other, and who then must in consequence put their own life on the line. This general reading is perhaps most famously associated with the 'anthropological' commentary of Kojève,⁴ which was critically adopted by major French philosophers like Fanon⁵ and de Beauvoir,⁶ but variations of it can be found in many subsequent commentaries, including those of Loewenberg,⁷ Ciavatta,⁸ Stewart,⁹ Pippin,¹⁰ and Williams.¹¹ While there are assuredly

¹ John Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 63-64. He offers a similar account in *The Self and Its Body in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997, pp. 62-63.

² Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 153.

³ *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1976, p. 127.

⁴ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Allan Bloom (ed.), trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980. While famously holding that "Desire must be directed toward [...] another *Desire*" (p. 40), Kojève equally affirms that this desire manifests itself as the negation of the other: "To be *human*, man must act not for the sake of subjugating a *thing*, but for the sake of subjugating another *Desire* (for the thing). The man who desires a thing humanly acts not so much to possess the thing as to make another *recognize* his *right* [...] to that thing, to make another recognize him as the *owner* of the thing. And he does this—in the final analysis—in order to make the other recognize his *superiority* over the other. [...] [Thus] *several* Desires [...] can desire one another mutually, each of which wants to negate, to assimilate, to make its own, to subjugate the other Desire as Desire [...] [I]t is obvious that the Action that is born of these Desires can [...] be nothing but a life and death *Fight*. [...] A *Fight*, since each will want to subjugate the other, *all* the others, by a negating, destroying *action*" (pp. 40-1).

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, New York, Grove Press, 1968, pp. 216-222.

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, New York, Vintage, 1974, pp. xv-xxxiv.

⁷ J. Loewenberg, *Hegel's Phenomenology: Dialogues on the Life of the Mind*, La Salle, Ill., Open Court, 1965, "None can make good the claim to be the center of true selfhood without challenging the same claim on the part of would-be rivals, destruction of whose selfhood is here the most effective way of demonstrating the claim's falsity" (p. 84).

differences between all such interpretations, all paint ‘Self-consciousness’ as presenting a dialectic between two particulars that confront each other as a threat to their particular desire for mastery, and who therefore fight to eliminate their rival before ultimately coming to some (albeit unstable) reconciliation. It is this reading that grounds the also increasingly prevalent understanding of Hegel as fundamentally a thinker of inter-subjective *recognition*.¹² On this reading, Hegel’s dialectic of desire would proceed from the conflict between particular, selfish agents up to increasingly universal ethical and social structures through which individuals are reconciled to one another through the reciprocal limitation of individual perspective. Hegel’s account would begin, in short, with particular individuals, certain of themselves as determining centers of desire, who struggle in an attempt to dominate each other, but ultimately progresses towards increasingly universal individuals who seek to rationally live together in mutual benefit and recognition.

⁸ David V. Ciavatta, *Spirit, the Family and the Unconscious in Hegel’s Philosophy*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2009: “This struggle arises precisely because each self cannot help taking its own consciousness to be the incomparable source of all meaning, the absolute center of all that matters in the world. And yet, at the same time, each self cannot help experiencing the very presence of the other as laying claim to being the center. Each self thus immediately experiences the other as a challenge to its own experience of itself [...] The most immediate way of eliminating the other’s challenge is, of course, to kill the other” (pp. 32-3).

⁹ Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Systematic Interpretation*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 2000: “when confronted by the other, each self-conscious agent realizes that the other’s account differs from its own [...] Self-consciousness sees the other as inessential, i.e., as its own simple determination and not as something independent, and attempts to reduce it to the status of an object. [...] Self-consciousness tries to validate its own Notion of subject and object by the destruction of the other” (pp. 132-3).

¹⁰ Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989: “the subject’s self-sentiment is itself negated by an other, when its pursuit of satisfaction is challenged by another subject” and since “subjects can rely on no common or ‘universal’ point of view to resolve any conflict [...] all we can assume as a result of any conflict is war, a struggle to mastery” (p. 160; p. 158).

¹¹ Robert R. Williams, ‘The Concept of Recognition in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*’, in Alfred Denker and Michael Vater (eds.), *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: New Critical Essays*, New York, Humanity Books, 2003, pp. 59-92: “There is a collision between the presumptive self-certainty of total independence and the confrontation with the other. [...] The presence of the other is experienced initially as a loss of self. This is intolerable and demands a response. [...] [C]ompelling the other to recognize one’s self-certainty means putting one’s own existence at risk [...] Consequently, a life-and-death struggle ensues” (pp. 70-1).

¹² See, e.g. Axel Honneth, ‘From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s account of human sociality’, in Dean Moyar and Michael Quante (eds.), *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 76-90 or Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Undoubtedly, there is much in Hegel's text that can be taken to suggest such a reading; I, myself, defended a variant of it in a previous work.¹³ However, I have gradually come to see this reading as fundamentally flawed; in fact, it now strikes me as reflecting something approximating the opposite of Hegel's argument. Through a close reading of the movement from self-conscious desire to the moment of struggle, I seek to refute three key claims of the prevalent reading: a) that self-consciousness finds itself, *qua* determining center, challenged by another desire, b) that self-consciousness responds to this challenge by seeking to somehow subjugate the other as determining desire, and c) that self-consciousness risks its own life primarily as a consequence of seeking the death of the other.¹⁴ The interpretation I will defend is not without precedent, and draws upon previous work by Gadamer,¹⁵ Harris,¹⁶ Hyppolite,¹⁷ and Kainz,¹⁸ among others. These readings, however, lack direct confrontation with the aforementioned theses and, as such, fail to develop and defend their interpretation with sufficient depth to refute them. Self-consciousness, I argue, does not first seek to maintain its self-certainty in the face of the other, only to ultimately accept a structure of mutual recognition; rather, self-consciousness first seeks to *recognize itself in the other*, but thereby grasps the flaws in its concept of recognition, ultimately retreating back into itself. In order to build a convincing case against the prevalent view, I will restrict my comments to the *Phenomenology*,¹⁹ leaving aside earlier and later reformulations of the relationship, and I will focus specifically on the logic of desire. I close with some (somewhat speculative) comments on the import of this reversal for understanding the role of recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

¹³ Jim Vernon, 'Homogeneity and Heterogeneity: Bataille and Hegel', *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2004, pp. 317-338.

¹⁴ Kojève's reading may escape this charge, given his focus on "pure *prestige*" but, even if the risk of life is immediately and essentially entailed by it, the subjugation of the other is still presented as logically first (pp. 41).

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hegel's Dialectic of Self-Consciousness", in his *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. Christopher Smith, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 54-74.

¹⁶ In particular, H.S. Harris, *Hegel: Phenomenology and System*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1995, pp. 36-7. Elsewhere, however, he draws closer to the recognitive reading I seek to problematize, e.g. *Hegel's Ladder I: The Pilgrimage of Reason*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997, pp. 351-6.

¹⁷ Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman, Evanston, Ill, Northwestern University Press, 1974, pp. 168-171.

¹⁸ Howard P. Kainz, *Hegel's Phenomenology, Part I: Analysis and Commentary*, University, AL., University of Alabama Press, 1976, pp. 87-90.

¹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977; *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970. References will in running text to the number paragraph in the Miller translation, followed by the German pagination in the form (§§1/11). Throughout, I freely alter Miller's added or subtracted italics to make them consistent with Hegel's, but amend the translation only when noted.

I THE NATURE OF DESIRE

The *Phenomenology* begins by accepting the natural presumption of consciousness that the object of experience should determine our concept of it. Starting with the sheer immediacy of sense-certainty, moving through the mediated ‘object-with-qualities’ of perception, and finally arriving at the law-governed world of the understanding, consciousness seeks in increasingly complex ways to ground its knowledge in that which is given to it from the outside, or is *other* than it. As the dialectic of consciousness unfolds, however, it gradually learns that its own concept of the object was in fact what it was witnessing in experience all along. That is, it comes to grasp that the experienced world is “only *appearance*, or a difference which, *in itself*, has no being [*der an sich kein Sein hat*]” (§167/139, trans. mod.). There is a distinction between consciousness and its other, but this distinction is implicitly posited by consciousness, and thus is not a distinction. What Hegel calls self-consciousness, then, arises as the explicit recognition that the objects of consciousness are always essentially mediated by its subjective concepts of what is, i.e. that consciousness, in experiencing that which appears as other to it, in fact “experiences only *itself*” (§165/135). The shift from consciousness to self-consciousness is that from conceiving of experience as determined by external, independent otherness to grasping it as determined by the concepts brought to bear on such otherness by the experiencer.

However—and this is in many ways the key to the entire section—this does not mean that consciousness perceives a new kind of object; to the contrary, the world of perception and understanding remains present essentially as before. All that has changed is consciousness’ grasp of what is, i.e. it now holds the perceived world of objective nature as being unified with its consciousness. But, because the objects experienced have not changed, its experience still appears to be of otherness differentiated from, rather than unified with, the experiencer; that is, its experience of ‘what is’ seems to contradict its new concept of it. As such, it is still the case that “this unity must become essential to self-consciousness” (§167/139). Self-consciousness, then, contains two moments: a) the objective other of external nature, whose independence is only negative for it, although enduring, and b) its own self-consciousness, which is now grasped as being negatively opposed to the enduring other. Thus, self-consciousness confronts and is essentially defined by the contradiction between its experience of objects (i.e. their independent otherness) and what must be true of them (i.e. their essential unity with consciousness). Because of the tension between its experience and its truth, self-consciousness differentiates itself from mere consciousness by its resultant *efforts* to remove what remains of the subject/object distinction. Self-consciousness, proper, is thus the “movement in which this antithesis is removed [*aufgehoben*]” (§167/139). Hegel calls the movement by

which self-conscious negates otherness, or “destroys the independent object” (§174/143), “*desire* in general [*Begierde überhaupt*]” (§167/139). Since self-consciousness differs from mere consciousness just by this negating movement, “self-consciousness is desire” (§174/143).

II THE DESIRE FOR ANOTHER DESIRE

The central issue, then, concerns how self-consciousness manifests itself as desire. Hegel is conspicuously short on specifics, here, and there are serious flaws in the more obvious candidates. Eating,²⁰ e.g. transforms objects quite literally into unities with the eater, but in an unsatisfactory way, as it in fact unites with the objective body—an aspect of living nature—rather than with the desirous self-consciousness ‘within’ it. As such, it hardly seems a true manifestation of desire. Through the preceding dialectic of ‘Force and the Understanding’, of course, consciousness has already learned that discerning a lawful organization to the world is in fact experiencing the object as its own self (i.e. as mediated by the concept of law and its species), and thus determining objects as lawfully related, rationally defined, etc. seems a better candidate for self-consciousness’s “posit[ing] *for itself* [*setzt es für sich*]” the “nothingness of the other” (§174/143, trans. mod.). By extension, one might suggest that all previous meaningful determinations of objects as dependent through the mediation of consciousness (denotation, predication, explanation, etc.) have shown themselves to be revelatory of the unity of the object with consciousness, and thus might manifest the movement of desire. However, the dialectic of consciousness through which these determinations arose has itself given way to the desirous self-consciousness which presents the very problem now at issue. Desire cannot simply re-tread the actions of consciousness and actualize itself as self-consciousness. As such, it appears difficult to grasp how self-consciousness could, in fact, concretely negate otherness into itself.

This is, of course, the problem self-consciousness, itself, immediately confronts. Negating objects through either consumption or meaningful determination rests upon the presence of otherness as available for such negation. It is only because objects externally appear as edible, e.g. that they can be eaten, or because they appear as lawfully integrated life that they can be scientifically understood. The otherness of the object is thus affirmed as the real ground of these negating relations, for without it, the specific act of negation could not take place; i.e., “in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other” (§175/143). As such, self-consciousness still seems to be bound to external determination, for its available methods of negation only serve to remind it that “[d]esire and the self-certainty obtained in its

²⁰ While not actually cited as an example in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel does suggest it elsewhere, e.g. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. I*, trans. T.M. Knox, London, Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 36-37.

gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other" (§175/143). Without the object, there is no movement of supersession, and as such it "is in fact *an other* [*ein Anderes*] than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire" (§175/143, trans. mod., emphasis added). The problem, then, is that, as desire, self-consciousness ineluctably posits the independent otherness of the object, and thus "because of that relation [between desire and object, self-consciousness] produces the object again, and [thus] the desire as well" (§175/143). It appears, then, that desire is inevitably and inherently frustrated, and thus that the objective other returns to its rightful independence, and self-consciousness reverts back to mere consciousness.

However, this conclusion would simply return us to the preceding stages of the dialectic, which has already revealed the object to be necessarily unified with the subject. As such, self-consciousness must experience satisfaction, for that is the truth of mere consciousness. Self-consciousness must be satisfied, but objects that can merely be eaten or meaningfully determined cannot provide the necessary satisfaction. Self-consciousness quite simply cannot satisfy its desire through actions of its own; it thus needs the object to satisfy desire for it. Through the failures of its own attempts to negate objects into itself as desire, as well as its awareness of the truth of experience, self-consciousness comes to realize that there must be cases available within objective otherness wherein the "object itself effects [desire's] negation within itself" (§175/144). Self-consciousness must come to know an object that, in itself, is self-negating. As such, since self-consciousness' genuine object "is in its own self negation [then in fact] it is consciousness" (§175/144), i.e. self-consciousness is essentially driven to experience a negating desire identical to its own in an objective other. Because the object that satisfies self-consciousness is that which negates its own objective independence, because the negation of objects is desire, and because desire is self-consciousness itself, then, in Hegel's famous phrase, "[s]elf-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (§175/144).

Thus, what self-consciousness seeks in the other is the presence of the movement of negating desire that is itself. Self-consciousness, then, does not confront another consciousness with a distinct, competing claim to be the center of meaning or reality; it actively pursues the experience of another self-consciousness out of the presumption of the latter's essential identity with itself as desire. Desire is only satisfied by another desire, and desire is nothing more than the negation of otherness into unity with self-consciousness, wherever it resides; in this respect (and this is the only respect that matters, here), both self-consciousnesses (should another exist) are qualitatively identical. Self-consciousness does not confront a distinct, rival desire; it strives, rather, to find its own desire in an object. This is why Hegel helpfully warns us that, while its

moments “must on the one hand be held strictly apart, [they] on the other hand must in this differentiation also be taken and known as not distinct, or in their opposite significance” (§178/145). It is this presumption of the identity or universality of desire, the determination to demonstrate the unity of itself with another desire, rather than the effort to maintain its own particularity in the face of an external challenge, that drives the dialectic that follows.

III THE CONCEPT OF THE OBJECTIVE OTHER

Because self-consciousness has its object in another self-consciousness, it only “is in and for itself when and by the fact that, it exists for another; that is, it is only as recognized [*es ist nur als ein Anerkanntes*]” (§178/145, trans. mod.). There seems a leap, here, from the drive to *find* a desirous object to the need to be *recognized* by one. We will account for this move presently, but we should note the fact that recognition does not *result* from the outcome of the struggle, but is rather *sought* by self-consciousness before another self-consciousness has explicitly been found. Recognition, as we shall see, does not proceed from the struggle, but is that which is (unsuccessfully) sought through it. But first, why is self-consciousness’ need to find desire in an independent object a quest for recognition? Self-consciousness, seeking to satisfy its desire, knows it must find an object whose desire would be qualitatively identical to its own. That is, self-consciousness seeks to find itself (as desire) in the other (as desirous object). In fact, the “*I* which is the object of its concept is in fact not an ‘*object*’”, since it seeks the negating desire that it itself is, not anything truly other than itself (§177/145, trans. mod.). As such, the self-conscious desire sought in the other could only be present if it were identically driven to find an object to satisfy its desire, i.e. in so far as it also seeks another self-consciousness. Thus, what self-consciousness seeks is an object, within its experience, that is identically seeking desire in another object. Thus, self-consciousness seeks an object that seeks it, and thus to be recognized by that object as the self-consciousness it seeks.

As we have already seen, however, nothing in the mere desire of self-consciousness toward objects actually alters the objects experienced. The fact that self-consciousness seeks another desire is no proof that a new class of object, verifiable through experience, actually appears on the scene. No object, not even those that, e.g. appear to have similar bodies to ours, can strictly be perceived as self-conscious, because self-consciousness is desire, and desire is not only not an object, it is the negation of objective otherness. All objects are other than desire, and thus desire, quite simply, is an experience that self-consciousness knows cannot be afforded by merely given objects. As such, self-consciousness can only *posit* desire in objects, and the only desire it can posit is *its own*. Thus, when Hegel writes that “[t]here is for self-

consciousness an other self-consciousness [*Es ist für Selbstbewußtsein ein anderes Selbstbewußtsein*],”²¹ he immediately qualifies this as signifying that the first self-consciousness “has come *out of itself*” (§179/146, trans. mod.). Because desire is not an object, but opposed to such otherness, to take oneself to be experiencing another self-consciousness can only be to posit in an object one’s own desire. Self-consciousness comes out of itself by positing its desire in an other, who will subsequently be taken to be desirous, and who will thus (since it is posited as qualitatively identical desire) be taken to see the first as an object, rather than desire. As Hegel notes “in doing so, [self-consciousness] has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but sees *its own self* in another” (§179/146, trans. mod., my emphasis). This should be taken quite literally: self-consciousness posits desire in the object, thus negating the objective ‘otherness’ of the other, but as such grasps the other as itself, or as qualitatively the same desire as itself. To be ‘faced’ with another self-consciousness is to take a mere object to ‘house’ the same negating desire ‘housed’ within one’s own objective body, thus ‘negating’ its objective otherness into ‘identity’ with oneself.

The problem, of course, is that, even with this positing, the ‘otherness’ of the other does not simply disappear, but endures as independent. As with all other ‘negated’ objects, determining the meaning of it (in this case, positing within it one’s own desiring self-consciousness) fails to do more than re-affirm the independence of the object. One posits self-consciousness of the other to satisfy the demands of desire, but in so doing one makes satisfaction depend upon the presence of the other as so determined; something, moreover, the object as other cannot reveal. Self-consciousness posits its own desire in an object that simply refuses to confirm the ascription; as such, self-consciousness “has lost itself, for it finds itself in an *other* being [*ein anderes Wesen*]” (§179/146). Note Hegel’s emphasis: by positing its own desire in an object, it grasps its own negating power as existing in that which stands before it as enduring, natural otherness, not as desire; the otherness here is not another desire (for desire is the negation of otherness) but the existent objectivity to which it is ascribed (for that, as objective nature, is inherently other than desire). Thus, the object of desire a) is negated in its otherness, for it has desire posited in it by self-consciousness; b) nevertheless endures as an object, thus retaining its otherness from self-consciousness; and c) thus leads self-consciousness to lose itself in so far as its own negating desire is posited in an enduring other that, *qua* object, stands opposed to desire. It is no wonder, then, that Hegel refers to this as the “first ambiguity [*Doppelsinnes*]” of self-consciousness (§180/146), for self-consciousness finds the object

²¹ Miller’s translation, here, “[s]elf-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness” is misleading.

as both superseded and enduring, both desire and otherness, both itself and opposed to it.

It is, thus, only in this sense that we can speak of the ‘challenge’ of the other. Having been posited by self-consciousness as desire, not only does the object endure as ‘other’ before self-consciousness; it endures as ‘containing’ self-consciousness’s own desire, thus throwing self-consciousness’s own self-certainty into question. As such, self-consciousness “must supersede *its being-other* [*muß dies sein Andressein aufheben*]” (§180/146, trans. mod.), or its given objectivity. Again, the actual process of supersession is far from clear, as Hegel admits, telling us that this “supersession of the first ambiguity [...] is therefore itself a second ambiguity” (§180/146). The other as distinct object must be superseded, for it is precisely its objectivity that prevents the identity demanded by self-consciousness from being experienced; thus, self-consciousness “must proceed to supersede *the other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being” (§180/146). However, since it has posited its own essence (desire) in the objective other, any effort to negate the latter is in fact a self-negation, through which it “supersede[s] its *own* self, for this other is itself” (§180/146). Thus, self-consciousness cannot negate the other, first because it has already seen that its available ways of negating the merely objective lead to no satisfaction, and secondly because negating the object in which it has posited its own desire would amount to negating itself. It is simply the enduring presence of the other as objective, then, that stands in the way of the satisfaction of desire. Because neither the negation of the object, nor the negation of its own desire in the object can lead to satisfaction, the only way for self-consciousness to actually overcome the alterity of the other is to cease ascribing desire to the other and return desire from its split into the other back into itself. As such, it “supersedes this being of itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free” (§181/146), returning it to independent objectivity.

It is important to note, as Hegel at this point does, that nothing in the preceding depends upon any particular revelations of desire actually *coming from the other*; to the contrary, Hegel explicitly claims that “this movement of self-consciousness in relation to another self-consciousness has in this way been represented as the action of *one* self-consciousness” (§182/146, Hegel’s italics). Nothing in the other provides the impetus for any of the moves hitherto; rather, what Hegel describes are the stages internally necessary to the positing of one’s own self-consciousness in an object taken to be one that will satisfy one’s desire, and the problems that arise therein. Self-consciousness has, in an effort to satisfy its desire, determined one object to be implicitly identical with its power of objective negation, and the preceding is what logically follows from that one-sided action. Admittedly, Hegel’s language, here, is somewhat confusing.

He tells us, e.g. that “[e]ach sees the *other* do the same as its does [*Jedes sieht das andere dasselbe tun, was es tut*]” (§182/146). Taken literally, this is assuredly impossible, not only because Hegel asserts that nothing in the preceding invokes any action or expression on behalf of the other, but because one cannot ‘see’ desire, but only objective otherness. It is difficult to even imagine what it would even mean to literally ‘see’ another subject ‘lose themselves’ as self-conscious into one’s own desire, only to supersede that loss and return to themselves. As such, if Hegel’s case rested upon the experience of actually ‘seeing’ another as a distinct, competing center of desire, it would assuredly collapse. A more charitable interpretation would be that Hegel has switched, here, as he often does, from the perspective of ‘natural consciousness’ to that of the philosophical observer, who is reading back from a successful case of such recognition. That is, the descriptions of reciprocity are not what is ‘seen’ by self-consciousness, but what will have been done by the other in cases that eventually prove to have been of another self-consciousness. In fact, Hegel suggests this when he writes that “[a]ction by one side only would be useless because *what is to happen* can only be brought about by both” (§182/147, my emphasis). Assuredly, self-consciousness can mistakenly ascribe self-consciousness to objects (as when children believe their toys to be alive and responsive, or perhaps in religious animism, object sexuality, etc.) and may even refuse to ascribe self-consciousness to any others (as, perhaps, some sociopaths or severely autistic persons do). Desire is (or should be) sought by self-consciousness in objects, but only some objects will actually manifest it, and this is a lesson self-consciousness will have to learn. As we shall see, it is the fight itself that determines whether one’s ascription has truth, rather than the discernment of desire in the other leading to the necessity of struggle.

However, we can also explain such claims, while remaining within the immanent perspective of self-consciousness if we read the ‘double movement’ as simply deriving from what the first self-consciousness takes the other to be, i.e. desire. In assuming its ascription to be true, self-consciousness would no doubt also take the other to be implicitly performing the same moves as itself. Positing desire in the other entails that self-consciousness assumes that the other implicitly acts just as it does in the effort to satisfy its own desire. That is, the ascribing action undertaken by one self-consciousness—just because it takes the other to be identical to itself—presupposes the same action on behalf of the other, or as Hegel puts it, for self-consciousness, its “action is thus ambiguous, not only because it is an action *against itself* just as much as *against the other*, but also in so far it is inseparably *the action of one* just as much as it is as it is *of the other* [*Tun is also nicht nur insofern doppelsinnig, als es ein Tun ebensowohl gegen sich als gegen das Andere, sondern auch insofern, als es ungetrennt ebensowohl das Tun des Einen als des Anderen ist*]” (§183/147, trans. mod.). Thus, the ‘double movement’ might most

accurately be said to reflect both the presumption of one self-consciousness toward the other, as well as the necessary conditions for the further development of recognition as understood by the philosophical observer. Self-consciousness thus understands the other to be performing the same ascriptions as itself, and—looking back from the fulfillment of the relationship, as the philosophical observer is—must have been in the presence of such an other so doing in order for the dialectic to move forward beyond the struggle for recognition. Thus, Hegel speaks of ‘both sides’ to express both the presumptions of the first self-consciousness, as well as the anticipation of the revelation of self-consciousness in a ‘successful’ case of recognition.

This allows us to make sense of Hegel’s next move, which is “to observe how the process of this pure concept of recognition, of the duplicating of self-consciousness in its unity, *appears to self-consciousness*” (§185/147, trans. mod., my emphasis). If self-consciousness actually saw the other making the same ascription as it did, it would quite literally see the other recognizing it in return as self-conscious. As such, there would be no question as to how it looked to the first, and thus there would be no ‘struggle for recognition’, for each would have seen the other see it as self-conscious, thereby achieving recognition and resolving the issue. If the above reading is correct, however, self-consciousness did not ‘see’ the other recognizing it, and the experience of the other as mere objectivity still stands in contrast to its desire. As Hegel writes, “[t]he first does not have the object before it merely as it exists primarily for desire, but as something that has an independent existence of its own, which, therefore it cannot utilize for its own purposes” (§182/146). The object does not meet the demands of desire by revealing its identity with it, but remains independently other as an object. Positing desire in the other amounts to mere determining negation, and thus returns self-consciousness to its original problem, for, as we have seen, what is required is a self-negating object. Thus the other cannot satisfy desire if “that object does not of its own accord do what the first does to it” (§182/146). Self-consciousness, then, still confronts the tension between what it posits of objects (i.e. identity with itself as desire) and what it experiences of them (i.e. mere objective otherness). Thus, as Hegel writes, from the perspective of self-consciousness, the relationship initially “will exhibit the side of the inequality of the two [...] one being only recognized, the other only recognizing” (§185/147). If self-consciousness did, in fact, see the other ‘doing the same’, it would have ‘seen’ equal recognition; what self-consciousness, rather, confronts, is the fact that it, by posited ascription, has ‘recognized’ the other as self-conscious, while the other does nothing active in return, and thus refuses recognition. As Hegel puts it, as yet “they are for each other in the manner of ordinary objects;

independent forms in the *being* of *Life*' (§186/148, trans. mod.), rather than being experienced as self-conscious desire.

The issue, then, is not that the other threatens to impose its desire on self-consciousness; to the contrary, it is precisely that it does *not* reveal itself as desire, appearing rather as just another independent object. The problem, in short, is that the other of whom self-consciousness is ascribed has not yet demonstrated itself as desire, i.e. "they have not *as yet* presented themselves to each other in the form of pure *being-for-self*, i.e. as *self-consciousness*" (§186/148, trans. mod., emphasis added). This bears repeating: Hegel here explicitly asserts that the other has *not* shown itself to be self-conscious, i.e. that the first did *not* 'see' the other standing before it as challenging desire; rather, it remains for self-consciousness a mere object, and thus refuses to satisfy the demands of desire. It is in this sense that "[e]ach is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other" (§186/148), for each is only certain of its own self as self-conscious, while the presence of desire in the objective other remains in question. This self-certainty "would have truth only if its own being-for-self had confronted it as an independent object, or, what is the same thing, if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty" (§186/148). Because self-consciousness does not appear in mere objective form—because, in short, self-consciousness did not simply 'see the other do as it did' or confront a rival desiring center—its self-certainty remains in question.

IV THE STRUGGLE FOR (THE OTHER'S) SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

As we have seen, self-consciousness cannot remain content with this result, for it knows that desire is the truth of mere consciousness, and thus knows that it must be satisfied. However, self-consciousness knows that it can only be satisfied—i.e. its self-certainty can only have truth—if an object, in itself, demonstrably possesses the same other-negating desire. As such, self-consciousness "must accordingly set itself to find proof" of its ascription, i.e. "it must 'test' the alter-ego to adjudicate the presence" of desire.²² Self-consciousness must endeavor, in short, to objectively demonstrate the self-consciousness of the other. The question self-consciousness faces, then, is what it would look like for the other to reveal itself as self-consciousness?

As Hegel at this point reminds us, "[s]elf-consciousness is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything *other than itself*. [...] What is 'other' for it is an unessential, negatively characterized object"

²² Kainz, p. 88. While his presentation is quite compact, and lacks engagement with the rival view with which we opened, this strikes me as perhaps the most accurate rendering of the origin of the struggle in the literature.

(§186/147, trans. mod.).²³ Self-consciousness is essentially the negation of the otherness of objective life (and otherness, in this section, has consistently meant objective life). We have seen, however, that the mere negation of external objects does not actualize self-consciousness; that is why the recognitive relationship has been sought. However, we have also seen that self-consciousness posits the other as identical to itself, and thus would presume that the other (should its ascription be true) likewise faces it confronted by the same problem. Thus, for self-consciousness, what stands between the sides and the mutual satisfaction of their identical desire is the physical objectivity in which their desire is presumably ‘housed’, i.e. their living bodies. Desire is the negation of objectivity, and thus self-consciousness seeks to reveal itself as desire to revealed desire, but because both sides, *qua* embodied, are also objectivity, it sees the other, and presumes the other sees it, as mere objective life. From the perspective of self-consciousness, then, so long as each appears simply as an objective body within living nature, neither can be recognized as self-conscious. Desire can only be revealed by negating the object which stands, *qua* other, in the way of satisfaction, i.e. the living body. Because self-consciousness needs to see desire in the other, it needs the other to negate its own objectivity (i.e. to reveal itself as the negation of otherness itself). As Hegel puts, such a “*presentation* of itself [...] as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself [to the other] as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not tied to determinate *being*, [i.e.] not tied to life [*Die Darstellung seiner [...] als der Abstraktion des Selbstbewußtseins besteht darin, sich als reine Negation seiner gegenständlichen Weise zu zeigen, oder es zu zeigen, an kein bestimmtes Dasein geknüpft [...] nicht an das Leben geknüpft zu sein*]” (§187/148, trans. mod.). Self-consciousness, thus, comes to see that the other can only reveal itself to be self-conscious if it shows itself to be essentially more than objective life, above it, indifferent to it, negating of it. What self-consciousness needs, then, is for the other to reveal its indifference to, or negation of, its own objective life. Self-consciousness seeks not to impose its own particular desire on the other’s particular desire in a contest of subjugation, but to ‘test’ the other’s attachment to its own life in order to win recognition, and as such must draw the other into revealing its indifference to, or negation of, objective life.

Of course, since self-consciousness presumes the identity of itself with the other, it likewise presumes that it appears to the other as a mere object, which also seeks to see in it the presence of desire. As such, if the other is, indeed, self-conscious, it, likewise,

²³ Here Hegel explicitly asserts the stance of desire is defined not by its will to mastery over other desires, but by its essential consciousness/object dualism. It is this stance, ultimately, that must be overcome to move beyond the desire for recognition that leads to the struggle.

will only recognize the first as self-conscious if it reveals its own lack of attachment to its objective, embodied existence to the other desire. Self-consciousness must thus demonstrate its own willingness to negate its own body and the other, should it be self-conscious, will seek to do the same in turn, satisfying the desire of the first. Self-consciousness can thus only be satisfied if *both* sides present themselves as indifferent to objective life by mutually negating it both in the other and themselves; in Hegel's terms, each "must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, *in the other and in themselves* [my emphasis]" (§187/149, trans. mod.). This line is key: each must not only force the other to reveal itself as self-conscious; each must likewise show the other that it in turn rises above and negates mere life. As Hegel writes, according to "the concept of recognition [self-certainty can only have truth] when each is for the other what the other is for it, only when each is its own self through its own action, and again through the action of the other [thus] achiev[ing] this pure abstraction of being-for-self" (§186/148, trans. mod.). Self-consciousness requires the other to reveal itself, through life-negating action, as self-conscious desire, and it can only reveal itself to the other as desire through the same action. Neither can be (recognized as) self-conscious, then, if they do not show themselves, through concrete action, to be negating of objectivity, and thus the other must be drawn into battle in order for both to reveal themselves as mutually indifferent to life, for

it is only [in] the staking of life through which freedom is, [or] through which it is proven that, for self-consciousness, its essence is not *being*, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be as a vanishing moment, [i.e.] that it is only pure *being-for-self* [*es ist allein das Daransetzen des Lebens, wodurch die Freiheit, wodurch es bewährt wird, daß dem Selbstbewußtsein nicht das Sein, nicht die unmittelbare Weise, wie es auftritt, nicht sein Versenktsein in die Ausbreitung des Lebens das Wesen, – sondern daß an ihm nichts vorhanden, was für es nicht verschwindendes Moment wäre, daß es nur reines Fürsichsein ist*]. (§187/149, trans. mod.).

What is essential, then, is not the imposition of one's particular desire on the other, but the actualized revelation that both parties are identically self-conscious through the concrete negation of determinate life on behalf of both parties. It is this demonstration of free self-consciousness that grounds, and is brought about by, the struggle.

Thus, the struggle is instigated by self-consciousness with the explicit intention of demonstrating that both itself and its presumed other are more than mere life. It is not enough, then, for either to seek the death of the other alone (cowardly murder from behind, by trick, e.g.), as it would be if the purpose were simple subjugation. Nor would it be enough for one to reveal its own indifference to specific being without

struggle (death-defying bravery, suicide, etc.), as perhaps would suffice for earning pure prestige. Rather, for self-conscious desire, risking its life and making the other risk its own are essentially the same movement, and thus “just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the death of the other, for *it values the other no more than itself*” (§187/149, my emphasis). Clearly, self-consciousness values the other as self-conscious; the quest for an object that is identical to itself as desire has been the very motor of the dialectic. If it actually sought to destroy the desire of the other, it would be seeking its own death as desire, as Hegel notes in the earliest, ambiguous form of ‘recognition’. And clearly it also values itself as self-conscious, since it risks its physical life to prove its own being-for-self to the other. What it does not value is that which stands between the unity of self-conscious desire split between itself and the other, i.e. the physical bodies of the combatants. Self-consciousness, then, does not seek to preserve itself as determining center in the face of the challenge of a distinct desire; to the contrary, it seeks, through struggle, to overcome the obstacle to the identity presumed between itself and the other as desire, i.e. their physical bodies.

Granted, Hegel does claim that this “presentation is a two-fold action: action on the part of the other, and action on its own part. In so far as it is the action of the *other*, each seeks the death of the other” (§187/148). This does make it sound as though one responds to a threat of some kind, in that the other’s action is credited with bringing about the mutuality of violence. However, Hegel’s account, as we have seen, is made from the first-person perspective of self-consciousness, and thus from its understanding of the other’s inevitable actions, given the identity of desire posited of it. As such, the action of the other comes from the challenge made to its being, and the presumed—and sought—response to it. This explains the following sentence: “But *in doing so* (my emphasis), the second kind of action, *action on its own part*, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of its own life” (§187/148). Here, Hegel makes clear that the action on the part of the other is brought about by what the first does; or perhaps more precisely, is expected to be brought about (we may be wrong, after all, about the other being self-conscious, or they may be too attached to life to reply in kind). It is only, however, in cases where the action of mutual negation is reciprocal—i.e. where the other responds to our challenge to reveal itself as indifferent to embodied objectivity by forcing the first to reveal itself as more than mere life—that self-consciousness genuinely, demonstrably finds itself face to face with another self-consciousness, thus distinguishing ‘mistaken’ attempts at recognition from successful ones (although the above account, of course, also explains how and why such mistakes can be and are made). Self-consciousness seeks to force the other to show itself to be more than mere life, to rise above it by showing its indifference to

its own life, thus challenging the first to show indifference via negation to its own. While self-consciousness may seek desire in many objects, and thus make false positings, the truth of these mere certainties is revealed through the concrete action of the other in the face of the threat of death. It does take two to actually struggle, but on both sides, the fight is begun to reveal the self-consciousness they mutually share.

In sum: self-consciousness does not face of the challenge of another desire; to the contrary it seeks and provokes such a challenge from out of the field of objective otherness. As such, the fight to the death is not a battle for mastery or subjugation; rather “the relationship of both self-conscious beings is such that they *prove themselves and each other* [as self-conscious desire] *through a life-and-death struggle*” (§187/148-9, trans. mod., my emphasis). Thus, finally, the risk of one’s own life is not a mere consequence of the drive to suppress another desire, but something essential to the demonstration of desire in the other. The struggle, then, arises from the already presupposed *identity* of the actors engaged, *qua* self-conscious, rather than from the experienced *difference* between them, *qua* embodied life, and seeks to eliminate the latter to demonstrate the former. The struggle, in short, is not started to win dominance for individual self-conception in the face of a rival’s existential challenge, but to demonstrate the universality of free being-for-self necessarily presupposed by and in all desiring agents.

V CONCLUSION

Of course, in order for self-consciousness to know that the other is equally desire, it must survive such that it can know it, and the other must survive to be so known. And if it is to be recognized as desire itself, the other must survive to so recognize it, and it must survive to be so recognized. Pure being-for-self, then, can only be known by and in living particularities, i.e. in “this experience, self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness” (§189/150),²⁴ and the first combatant to learn this lesson pulls back from the fight. Witnessing the other cling to mere life, the one who refused retreat, given the logic above, understandably sees the other as nothing more than an object which it can consume for its own purposes. Thus, the struggle ends in the master/slave relationship, through which the master comes slowly to realize the emptiness of its ‘victory’ and the slave, by working to alter objects to actualize the master’s desire, rather than its own, comes both to see its negating self-consciousness manifested in objectivities as well as the infinite universality of its specific negating powers. While we lack the room, here, to explore in detail the remainder of the dialectic of self-consciousness, we can indicate, albeit only briefly

²⁴ Here, then, self-consciousness begins to abandon its dualistic stance.

and somewhat speculatively, a general consequence for understanding the role of recognition in Hegel's text.

On the 'contest for dominance' reading, as we have seen, the dialectic of recognition arises between two distinct self-consciousnesses, each of whom takes its particular determinations of 'what is' to be absolute. In the face of a challenge "occasioned by the other" each "self discovers that it is not universal, but [...] a particular opposed to another particular".²⁵ If this view is correct, then, moving beyond the struggle and the hollow victory of the master, can only proceed via negotiation between particular perspectives, through which self-consciousness seeks to "reconcile [its] experience with the experience of others".²⁶ The slave, for example, in working for the master, takes on and comes to understand the other's specific desires, thus "[i]ncorporating the other's perspective into [their] own [and producing] an enlarged mentality and self-identity".²⁷ While, on this reading, the master/slave relation is adamantly a deficient form of recognition, it signals the essential core of Hegel's account of spirit, which concerns the progressive coalescence of distinct perspectives through relations and institutions of mutual education and self-limitation. Recognition, occasioned by the determinate existence of other particulars, pushes on to the enlargement of particularity through the mutual incorporation of alternate perspectives, grounded in particular, experiencing agents. As such, recognition, while "a subordinate theme in Hegel's *Phenomenology*",²⁸ forms the core of Hegel's account of self-conscious and spiritual development, through which alone subjects can aspire to universal reason and freedom. The universality self-consciousness achieves through recognition, however, is situationally determined by the embodied particularity of individuals and their perspectives, rather than the universal essence of humanity as freely determining negation. One might say, in fact, that the 'universality' won through such recognition amounts to nothing more than progressively enlarged particularity.

On the interpretation defended above, however, recognition does not arise between two irreducibly particular perspectives. To the contrary, it is sought to confirm the always already presupposed universality between self-conscious subjects; what one seeks to recognize in the other is oneself as free negation, and what one longs for the other to recognize is the identical essence in oneself. It is a struggle *for* recognition of a mutually shared essence, rather than a struggle to preserve particularity which *results* in a relation of mutual recognition through coalescent

²⁵ Williams, p. 67.

²⁶ Russon, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology*, p. 227.

²⁷ Williams, p. 68.

²⁸ Williams, p. 59.

perspectives. The demand for recognition can, thus, only arise between beings that presume each other to share the same universal essence, rather than those who stubbornly affirm their own particularity. This universal essence—the negative, free relation to determinate being—is not abandoned or expanded by the slave, but successfully confirmed through its concrete labour. It is by actively transforming, rather than merely theorizing or destroying objects, that the slave comes to see the universal essence of self-consciousness in objectivity. Through concrete, productive work that transforms objects into expressions of universal freedom, the slave’s universal self-consciousness, or the “negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and *something permanent*” (§195/153-4). It is by altering merely contingent beings into universally recognizable evidence of freely negating self-consciousness that the slave comes to see its own free negativity manifested in things, and thus objectively grasps that universal being-for-self belongs to, and can be actualized by, him, or “becomes conscious that he exists in and for himself [*es kommt zum Bewußtsein, daß es selbst an and für sich ist*]” (§196/154, trans. mod.). As such, the slave grasps his universal essence as infinite, free self-consciousness through his own objective work, rather than through any recognition from the master. While assuredly much more needs to be done to truly actualize freedom in being, because such work is an inherent capacity of desiring self-consciousness, this essence can thereby be recognized by individuals as truly universal, even without actual recognition from particular others. The universal essence of humanity, then, is proven and actualized through productive, enduring expressions of free, negating spirit, rather than the limitation or expansion of one’s particularity in the face of other contingently experienced perspectives.

As such, if inter-subjective recognition is always brought about between particular perspectives, it is not accidental that it is a subordinate theme in Hegel’s work. The essence of self-consciousness can be grasped as truly universal by individuals without recourse to the contingent perspectives and explicit recognition of others. As such, spirit does not proceed by rationally unifying contingent particularity into a more expansive form, but by constructing increasingly adequate expressions of the demonstrably shared essence of humanity. Of course, I make no pretense to having demonstrated the necessity and nature of such actualizations of human essence through the preceding. The consequences of this reading will have to be traced through the remainder of the *Phenomenology* (esp. the section on ‘Morality’) as well as the other aspects of his *Realphilosophie*. However, by re-examining the origin, nature and outcome of the struggle for recognition, I hope to have at least problematized the view that Hegel’s account of spirit proceeds from combatant particularity through to situationally defined ‘universality’. I hope, thereby, to contribute, in some small way,

to the re-subordination of inter-subjective recognition as a theme in Hegel's conception of spirit, in favour of a demonstrably universal, productive, and ultimately prescriptive ethics and politics.²⁹

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²⁹ I develop a non-recognitive account of Hegel's social and political philosophy in "Siding With Freedom: Towards A Prescriptive Hegelianism", *Critical Horizons*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, pp. 49-69.