

Going Beyond the Self: Hegel on Recognition

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ABSTRACT—*This paper argues that Hegel’s idea of recognition takes into account a conception (of humans) which goes beyond the self. This is seen in contrast to the liberal tradition, which seems at best of mere utility and at worst negative and not comprehensive as well. The concept of self consciousness is used to point out so as to how recognition becomes a function to be achieved only through the other. Does it mean that there would be mutual recognition or would there be different kinds of recognitions (depending upon consciousnesses)?*

Keywords—Hegel, recognition, self consciousness, master slave dialectics.

1. INTRODUCTION

GWF Hegel had traveled the path that, in some senses JJ Rousseau had paved, to attach an essential social element to the atomistic conception of human beings of the liberal tradition. This contrast is significant as the latter would understand the individuals to be complete in them. While the triumphant liberal tradition has its essential distinction between the public and the private to be a very important modern morality, the liberal-individual tradition gives at best a one-sided and at worst a distorted understanding of the humans—which, to an extent, has been settled after the crucial intervention of Carol Hanisch (1970) and the second wave of feminism.

Hegel’s conception of recognition is significant for the accommodation of the other within the self and in turn the absence of recognition of the one without another which can be seen to be mostly applicable to humans as even the juridical conception of the individual being the ultimate unit of analysis seems a reminiscent of the liberal tradition which has shaped most of the modern legal mechanisms. It seems important to remark at this juncture that for the above and other purposes, such a conception (the liberal) of humans is very useful and better ways than many to deliver justice. However, when we take Hegel’s understanding of recognition into account such conceptions (of humans) seem at best of mere utility and at worst negative and not comprehensive as well.

Hegel’s concept of recognition is very important in the present scenario when identity politics has gone a notch above the class politics and forms an important basis for the deliberations of justice for marginalized groups. The identity politics has found in the theory of recognition its philosophical defense. When mutual recognition of various groups is referred to, it can be seen on the lines of the dialectic of the master and the slave. It seems to be an important philosophical justification for the new social movements against the rhetoric of the liberal democratic state that the various groups in the society are mutually constitutive and are in perfect harmony. As Saul Tobias puts it: “...the philosophical defense of identity politics is characterized by a psychosocial account of mutual recognition as a vital need whose telos is acknowledgment, conceived dialogically in terms of inter subjective communication and more broadly as political and legislative acknowledgment in the space of public negotiation and debate” (Tobias 2006-07)

While for Charles Taylor (1994) recognition remains a universal psychological need, Axel Honneth (1992) calls recognition to be essentially dialogical—a struggle of claims and counter claims that assumes a shared space of public discourse. Whatever their interpretations of recognition have been, philosophers have invariably relied on Hegel for the genesis of the term. So, here we shall find out what Hegel would have to say of the same in his conceptualization of ‘Lordship and Bondage’.

2. UNDERSTANDING ‘INDEPENDENCE AND DEPENDENCE OF SELF CONSCIOUSNESS’

Hegel in the Jena period talks of the same in the section B.IV (The Truth of Self Certainty) in what many regard as the most crucial and representative of his works—*Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Ph S from here on). Hegel seeks to solve the Kantian contradiction between theoretical and practical reason. While Kantian morality prohibited from treating persons as things, for Hegel theoretical reason comes above and treats everything, including humans, to be things as such (in a crude manner) or in other words “...theoretical reason takes all of reality as its object... If the other is nothing but my object, nothing in itself, then even slavery, it would seem, would be a likely consequence of theoretical reason”, as Philip Kain (2005) puts it. In this sense, the self also being a constructed entity is a problematic the Hegelian philosophy is faced with (Kain 2005).

However, we can put this the other way round: the recognition of an object (or even a self—as it was just like any other object) by another is what makes it or in other words its existence itself is dependent on the other. “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (Ph S, #178). To begin with, let everything (including life and spirit) be constructed objects—now the transition from object to life is only dependent in its acknowledgement from the other. When two objects take this journey to become life or consciousness, both of them seek to denigrate each other to mere objects in their pursuit of attaining consciousness. Would one of them emerge as a victor?

Hegel understands consciousness to be the key element in understanding his philosophy which takes ‘the other’ to be an essential element. Self consciousness (SC from here on) gets reflected out of a being but is only complete when as a return from the other. While we had primarily understood the constructed elements of the sensual world to be objects (without foregoing that), we should now, as a result of the connotation of the term consciousness understand it to have life or spirit, which for Hegel was phenomenological. So, there would be two beings at least, following from this logic and also with the dialectic of object and life within them. Now, Hegel considers the object to have become life through reflection via the other after ‘returning into itself’. This can take us to the dilemma that the liberal scholarship had neglected and Hegel was out to solve. When we are not considering the inanimate objects and animals or in other words, only considering humans—both the ‘objects’ have a possibility of becoming life and thus a dialectic between two self consciousnesses. What would be the consequence of that? While the liberals had shown both the beings to be pleasure seeking and with equal capacity (like in Hobbes), how would Hegel go beyond that? What would happen to both the self-consciousnesses? Would it lead to a perpetuating quest for recognition?

The SC is called so as known to have desire. The concept of desire becomes one of the key elements in Hegel's analysis of recognition. The reflection of a SC into itself is nothing else but a satisfaction of desire—the desire for recognition. So, while in Hobbes, there was a ‘war’ as many people desired the same object; now, the desire has gone beyond in being not seeking objects but acknowledgment from consciousnesses. It follows from this that (let us assume that there are two consciousnesses: SC1 and SC2) when SC1 is seeking recognition from SC2, in turn, SC2 is also seeking recognition from SC2. Let us observe the SC1 first. It loses itself in its endeavor to find itself in the other or it sees its own self in the other. Moreover as Hegel would suggest, being certain of one, it must proceed to supersede the other (Ph S #180). In this sense, SC1 treats SC2 as an object—only as an instrument for its recognition.

While the SC1 goes ‘out of itself’, yet such an action was ‘for itself’. Now, we also understand that SC2 also undertakes a similar activity like SC2 as it is also seeking recognition. So...“They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* each other” (Ph S #184). This has been interpreted by Robert Pippin (2000) to be in perfect harmony with what Hegel would come up 14 years after Ph S in ‘Philosophy of Right’ (1821) which is the coming together of the subjective and the objective in the ‘ethical life’ as the two subjectivities of the SCs come into an objectivity or what Pippin (2000) characterizes as mutuality based on rational acknowledgment in his pursuit of terming ‘ethical life’ as an extension of the theory of recognition. Is this a plausible claim?

According to Pippin (2000), Hegel’s theory of recognition is answering the question of freedom, its nature and very possibility. Pippin (2000) holds Hegel’s position on freedom to be peculiar as it is not a voluntarist position. Also, further

he calls it rational or universal notion of freedom supporting the claim here that unlike liberals, Hegel does not believe in freedom to be attained when one is pushed by or fulfills contingent desires. So, the self goes beyond itself in seeking freedom or what Pippin (2000) calls freedom developed as a result of societal interaction. Now, Pippin (2000) yet does not call that notion of freedom to be objective, still having own will, intentions and reasons; providing that notion of freedom with an inter subjectivity and thus a claim to continuity between the two magnum opuses of Hegel. While Pippin's (2000) position is interesting and helpful in learning the continuity in Hegel's work, it seems that it lacks in carving out the complexities of the master-slave dialectics, to which we shall return in a while only to discover that in the *Phenomenology* the particular and the universal do not exist in such tandem.

Saul Tobias (2006-07) talks of self determination and recognition being the separate moments in development of self consciousness. He speaks of moments of recognition in Hegel, yet not pertaining to moments of transformation:

..Hegel... designates an act of consciousness brought about through the perception and acknowledgment of an identity between self and other, resulting in a shift in understanding of self and other. Such moments of recognition recur throughout the *Phenomenology*, but they do not in themselves amount to moments of self-transformation, for such shifts in understanding must be internalized and then actualized in the world if a genuine transformation in self is to occur. Self-determination constitutes this next step in the development of consciousness by actualizing that changed self-conception. It denotes the active transformation of the self through concrete interaction between consciousness and substance, that being-in-itself which at first appears to be consciousness's other but emerges, in the form of Spirit, as its essence. (Tobias 2006-07)

With these perspectives on Hegel's recognition, let us go back to our example of SC1 and SC2. Can the recognition discussed above really be a mutual one? We would soon observe that, rather than mutually recognizing each other, in the race for recognition, inequality is soon discovered as the SC1 emerging as the *recognized* and SC2 as *recognizing* (say). How does that happen? Each consciousness is certain of own self and not of the other. To gain recognition, Hegel in the *Phenomenology* says that the two SCs are involved in a twofold action: a) both seek death of the other, and in such an endeavor b) stake their own life.

So, this tussle can be reduced like this: in the perpetual battle for recognition from the other life is staked. Freedom (which is to be an independent SC) indeed is won by staking one's life. Now, while life is the natural setting of the consciousness, death is the negation of the same. As both staked own life, "...held it of no account, both in himself and the other" (Ph S #188); again having a crucial contrast with the liberal theory where the preservation of life was the ultimate quest (at least in Hobbes).

However, very soon the... "Self Consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self consciousness". So one of the SCs values life more and thus in order to live accepts to be an object of mere recognition to the one which had valued recognition more than mere living. SC1 lives with recognition by SC2 and SC2 is satisfied with just having allowed to live and recognizing SC1. So, the two consciousnesses of our example—SC1 and SC2—can be called the independent and the dependent ones respectively. While the former is to be for itself, the latter now exists only to be for another. The former is the 'Lord', the latter the 'Bondsman' (Ph S #189). The lord is the consciousness existing for it. It is mediated with itself through another consciousness. As the bondsman was too attached to the natural desires (like life)—he comes out to be no better than an animal or an object; the lord, on the other hand, valued the desire for recognition more. His natural desires get fulfilled through the work of the bondsman's work, so ultimately the thing of desire is controlled by the lord as the bondsman's (who was inclined to the thing of desire) existence itself is for no other purpose than the lord:

The lord relates himself mediately to the bondsman through a being (a thing) that is independent, for it is just this which holds the bondsman in bondage; it is his chain from which he could not break free in the struggle, thus providing himself to be dependent, to possess his independence in thinghood. But the lord is the power over this thing, for he proved in the struggle that it is something merely negative: since he is the power over this thing and this thing again is the power over the other [the bondsman], it follows that he holds the other in subjection... For the lord, the immediate relation becomes through this mediation, the sheer negation of the thing or the enjoyment of it...the lord, who has interposed the

bondsman between it and himself, takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it. The aspect of its independence he leaves to the bondsman, who works on it. (Ph S #190)

So, at the moment of recognition “...the other self consciousness sets aside its own being-for-self, and in so doing itself does what the first does to it”. This becomes particularly interesting as this moment of recognition is unequal and one-sided. Clearly, the lord is seen as the one necessarily human and the more important one with its subjective will prevail. The bondsman sets his will (which in any case was just inclination) aside. “The slave works and the master enjoys. And, of course, in winning, as well as continuously through the slave’s work and subservience, the master gets the recognition he won. The master’s self-certainty, importance, and truth are continually affirmed” (Kain 2005). Both go beyond their selves—the lord to realize himself in the other and the bondsman lets go his self in order for the lord to get recognized. The lord performs pure and essential action, whereas the bondsman does the impure and inessential action. (Ph S #191).

What follows from this (the inequality and partial nature of recognition) is a paradoxical situation— that since the lord’s truth is realized in the bondsman, and since the bondsman is unessential consciousness and unessential action, the lord’s truth is also the same—deemed with inessentiality. So, the lordship could only attain the reverse of what it wanted to. Hegel further says that the bondsman will also become the opposite of what it immediately is—“...it will withdraw into itself and be transformed into a truly independent consciousness” (Ph S #193). But how does that happen? How would Hegel explain this reversal?

According to Hegel: “Through his service, he (the bondsman) rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it” (Ph S #194). The bondsman through his work keeps his desire in check, to attain consciousness. As we have remarked before, this is what makes Hegel’s master-slave dialectic to be crucial and even transformatory or what Kain (2005) calls

...the profound reversal that makes Hegel’s master-slave dialectic so classic... Such a master is subservient to a nobody; whereas the subordinate at least is subservient to a somebody. At any rate, Hegel’s master is not the independent consciousness he thinks he is. He is dependent on the slave for recognition as well as for the work that now satisfies his every need and desire. The master does little for himself. He has given himself over to the slave. Moreover, what truth, confirmation, self-certainty, can the slave, this inessential reality, this nothing, this object, give the master? The master is not pure being-for-self. (Kain 2005)

The slave, on the other hand, is transformed through continuous fear of death and through working for the other. The slave works on nature—control and even transform it to suit his purposes and desires (Kain 2005):

For Hegel, the slave does not rise up and overthrow the master. He develops interiorly beyond the master. The slave—not unlike much of the modern feminist movement— develops beyond the master by changing perspectives, revaluing values, teaching us a different meaning of independence, self-determination, accomplishment, being-for-self through being-for-another. (Kain 2005)

Finally, on his section on ‘Lordship and Bondage’, Kain (2005) calls the master to be a principle of subjective idealism as it recognizes nothing outside self and eventually degenerates into solipsism. The slave, on the other hand, introduces us to objective idealism by producing solid and lasting objects. “The praxis of the slave continually finds itself over against some-thing real” (Kain 2005).

3. MORE ON THE DIALECTIC: KOJEVE'S REVIVAL OF HEGEL

This can remind us of one of the most influential left Hegelian of the twentieth century and who is attributed for

having revived Hegelianism to rid it off the unnecessary metaphysical baggage (as the left Hegelians would believe) and wherefrom (in many ways) the Frankfurt school would carry it on. This section understands some of the crucial elements of the *Phenomenology* that Alexander Kojève would bring about.

Kojève in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (1947) begins by talking of the difference between humans and animals. An animal does not go beyond the sentiment of self; a man, on the other hand, is self-consciousness in his concern with human reality and dignity. While the animals desire for the natural, the same is just a necessary and not a sufficient condition in humans. As he interprets Hegel, Kojève calls the desire getting fulfilled by the negation/destruction of the desired object (he gives the example of food getting assimilated) (Kojève 1947).

On the other hand, for the SC (which is man—the first line of aforementioned book is: “Man is Self-consciousness”) desire is directed towards non natural objects, beyond the given reality (unlike animals). This desire is directed towards another desire (not that two desires directed towards same object). Human desire, for Kojève (1947), is multiplicity of animal desires—one directed towards another. The ‘I’ feeding on desires in it is a desire, created in and by satisfaction of its desire (Kojève 1947).

That is why social, for Kojève (1947), in reading Hegel, becomes an essential part of man.

...man can appear on earth only within a herd. That is why the human reality can only be social. But for the herd to become a society, multiplicity of Desires is not sufficient by itself; in addition, the Desires of each member of the herd must be directed—or potentially directed—toward the Desires of other members... Man ‘feeds on Desires as animal feeds on real things’. (Kojève 1947)

That is why, Kojève (1947) further says, life is risked for such a desire—the desire for own value in the eyes of the other, the seeking of recognition, thus, of oneself, as an autonomous value, by the other. So, finally, this desire for recognition has come out to be distinctly human or of self-consciousness. Even, life is risked for such a desire. “Therefore, to speak of the ‘origin’ of Self-consciousness is necessarily to speak of a fight to the death for ‘recognition’” (Kojève 1947).

However, if all humans behaved in this like manner, either both or one of the adversaries die. Even when one dies, who will be there to give recognition to the living one? We encountered this situation in the *Phenomenology*. Both the adversaries can remain alive after the fight only when one valued life more than recognition. Thus, the master and the slave; rather than killing the adversary directly, he was overcome dialectically. Life was left but autonomy destroyed to enslave (Kojève 1947).

However, it seems that Kojève can be accused of reading too much into the master-slave dialectic and even to the extent of interpreting all of Hegel’s philosophy to be reduced to that part of the *Phenomenology*—since he calls his book ‘Introduction to the Reading of Hegel’ and not that of ‘master-slave...’. While he would go on to elaborate on the same, we again encounter the issue of the recognition by the unessential consciousness and action. The slave is in a better position indeed by his transformation through his work. “It is by work in the Master’s service performed in terror that the slave frees himself from the terror that enslaved him to the Master”. True autonomy can only be reached by passing through slavery (Kojève 1947).

4. CONCLUSION

Such a position by a left Hegelian like Kojève is also taken to mean a profound influence of Hegel on Marx—to the extent of understanding the major of Marxist theories coming out of the master-slave dialectics. Jean-Paul Sartre in his influential *Being and Nothingness* (1943) speaks of the master-slave relation profoundly influencing Marx. Herbert Marcuse (1941) similarly discusses Marx sharpening his basic concepts through *Phenomenology*. He fits the analysis of the alienation of labour of Marx in terms of Hegel’s discussion of the master and servant, as Chris Arthur (1983) puts it.

The Hegelian position—the master-slave dialectic as well as the bigger picture that emerges out of the ‘ethical life’ is of profound importance to understand not only the society we live in but also the human beings as such. The Hegelian framework is immensely important to have a better understanding of the human beings in their pursuit of recognition and such a situation exists in the world and more so when socio-political conflicts have gone up after the 1970s. While Charles Taylor (1994) would speak of Hegel to be relevant in the multicultural realm, Honneth (1992) would have a different approach to the issue recognition when he talks of moral obligation. The claim of this paper is not that all these are reminiscence of Hegelian conception of recognition, rather it is that Hegel’s framework of master-slave dialectic as well as his three moments of ethical life have a lot of possibility to provide a better understanding of the present day conflicts in the realm of multiculturalism.

By analyzing the master-slave dialectic, we have tried in this paper to have a more comprehensive understanding of human beings, however, we have tried to understand a only a particular section of the *Phenomenology*, which nonetheless has been tremendously influential as even if not accepting all claims, some serious considerations have always been given to the ones talking of Existentialism as well as Marxism coming out of Hegel.

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