

## **The Return from Otherness: Hegel's Paradox of Self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit***

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In the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit's* fourth chapter, devoted to self-consciousness and the 'truth of self-certainty', Hegel states in a categorical and rather surprising manner that 'self-consciousness only achieves its satisfaction in another self-consciousness' (Hegel 1987, 139. My translation). This famous claim is the outcome of a reasoning path which starts with the emergence of self-consciousness as a phenomenological shape and follows a brief but complex series of transformations, whereby self-consciousness recognises itself successively as the negative of all otherness, as the desire to suppress that same otherness, as the translation of that desire within the eternal flux of life and, finally, as a mode of consciousness whose defining feature lies outside of itself, in its being recognised by another self-consciousness. According to Hegel, the mutual recognition of different self-consciousnesses gives rise, for the first time in the phenomenological history of consciousness, to the notion of Spirit (*Geist*), i.e., the acknowledgement that every individual mode of self-recognition is grounded upon the domain of inter-subjectivity.

This thesis, undoubtedly one of Hegelianism's most original and controversial features, is clearly stated early on in the *Phenomenology's* unfolding: *self-consciousness is only really conscious of itself once it recognises another self-consciousness and is recognised by it*. Its identity is not bound, therefore, to some primordial core of selfsameness, but rather to a necessary interaction with another self-consciousness. However, this thesis amounts to nothing less than a complete reversal of the way in

which we tend to look at the phenomenon of personal identity. Instead of an original *self*, to which the consciousness of an *other*, or the consciousness of otherness in general is added, Hegel tries to show that the consciousness of that *other* is the very condition for the emergence of an individual self – and, therefore, for any form of cognitive activity ever to take place. The phenomenon of self-consciousness is from the very start a collective phenomenon – or, in the *Phenomenology's* own terms, a *spiritual* phenomenon.

But this thesis is far from self-evident. Indeed, as was said, it seems to contradict the very experience of subjectivity: if my own self stands for the most intimate and secret dimension of my whole existence, something that only I know and only I can communicate, it is hard to accept that it might be in any way subsidiary of an external act of recognition. Moreover, if there is no individual self prior to otherness, a self which would oppose otherness and take note of that opposition, how can the acknowledgment of the existence of an *other* ever come about?

The problem is not an easy one, nor is the solution offered by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* easy. The following analysis aims to reassess the content and the scope of that solution. We will therefore start out from the beginning of the fourth chapter and the phenomenological birth of self-consciousness. This turning point in the progression signals the death of what Hegel calls the 'immediate' or 'objective' consciousness, that is, a mode of consciousness still haunted by the idea of the independent, self-sufficient existence of an external object. The abandonment of this naïve outlook will give rise to a truly subjective mode of self-recognition. And it is here, for the first time, that the problem of subjectivity is uncovered in all its complexity.

Nevertheless, in order to fully understand what is at stake in Hegel's claims, it is necessary to look more closely to the dialectical transformations leading up to the acknowledgment of self-consciousness as the necessary correlate of an inter-subjective relation. In what follows, we will argue that Hegel's collective self is the founding element of a global theory of practical agency. For Hegel, the problem of subjectivity is above all an *ethical* problem and the notion of subjectivity is tied up with the idea of a global ethical system, of which every individual self is but an isolated fragment.

## **I. Self-consciousness, Desire and Life**

In the transition from the third to the fourth chapters of the *Phenomenology*, the birth of self-consciousness signals the end of the objective attitude that had dominated all previous ontological models. From now on, objective reality is no longer regarded as an independent domain, opposed to the consciousness that thinks it. By recognising the phenomenal world as the result of a universal law, consciousness recognises itself as the author of that world. However, such recognition does not lead to the discovery of an absolute and paralysing selfsameness. If self-consciousness were to stand for an absolute coincidence of consciousness with itself, no further knowledge would be possible and the *Phenomenology* would come to a halt. But the self-sameness of self-consciousness is not tautological. Rather, its relation to itself, as Hegel puts it, is *infinitely* dynamic: by recognising something other than itself, consciousness realises at the same time that that difference is in fact no difference at all, and discards it; but at the same time, by becoming aware that its own ipseity is nothing more than the supersession of difference, consciousness breaks up its own unity and *posits* an other beyond itself.

What is here at stake is a new way of understanding the phenomenon of personal identity, radically opposed to the idea of a simple, tautological identity, maintained throughout the previous phenomenological stages. The self that now comes to light cannot be conceived as a substantial entity, endowed with a fixed identity. That mode of recognition is simply incapable of conveying its true nature, for unlike a thing, or a substance, self-consciousness is never equal to itself. It is what it is through the simultaneous positing of what it is not, i.e., through the positing of an otherness it continuously discards. Therefore, unlike a fixed entity, the self-conscious self is never simply *this* or *that*. Its identity stems from the very act of negating – it is itself the *negation of negation*, or as Hegel also puts it, an *infinite, self-reflected and self-moving being*.

Self-consciousness is therefore best defined as a movement, or better still as the double, simultaneous movement whereby consciousness steps out of itself, so to speak,

and returns to itself continuously<sup>1</sup>. In this infinite coming and going, *self* and *other* are both moments of self-consciousness and are both completely dependent upon each other: on the one hand, as if facing a mirror, consciousness can only acknowledge itself as self-consciousness by putting an *other* in front of itself; but that positing, in turn, is only possible because consciousness was already conscious of itself to begin with. Self-consciousness is a purely negative entity, which must be conquered anew with each new moment. In light of its self-moving nature, the tautology *I am I* does not really amount to a positive affirmation, but rather to the negative acknowledgment that *I am not another*. This *I* of which identity is predicated is nothing more than *what is left* when all otherness was gotten rid of and the domain of objectivity was absorbed into the domain of subjectivity. At this stage, self-identity corresponds, then, to the negation of everything that exceeds the pure coincidence of the self with itself. But this negation cannot be brought about in a single movement, in such wise that the possession of self-identity would be secured once and for all. For if self-identity is the result of a negation, its definition is necessarily dialectical: by stating that *I am not another*, that same *I* is forever tied to the otherness it seeks to eliminate. And that recurring other reopens, at each new *reprise*, the domain of objectivity. That is what Hegel means when stating that self-consciousness is at first nothing more than the return from otherness (*die Rückkehr aus dem Anderssein*). The self is defined, negatively, by what it is not – and in doing so, returns to the object that it must, once again, overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “simultaneous movement” is meant to convey the idea of an *absolute* or *infinite* simultaneity – something that common language is incapable of expressing. Indeed, the movement whereby consciousness distinguishes itself from itself and the counter-movement whereby it returns to self-sameness are not two different, chronologically successive movements. The interchange between identity and otherness is an absolute interchange, which means that, at any given moment, consciousness separates and unites itself *uno tempore*. It is this absolute simultaneity that Hegel aims to highlight when he insists, at the end of the chapter, on the *immediate* character of this double movement. Cf. Hegel 187, 130: “Indem ihm [dem Bewußtsein] dieser Begriff der Unendlichkeit Gegenstand ist, ist es also Bewußtsein des Unterschieds *als eine unmittelbar ebensosehr Aufgehobenem*; (...) Ich unterscheide mich von mir selbst, und *es ist darin unmittelbar für mich, daß dies Unterschiedene nicht unterschieden ist*. Ich, das Gleichnamige, stoße mich von mir selbst ab; *aber dies Unterschiedene, Ungleichgesetzte ist unmittelbar, indem es unterschieden ist, kein Unterschied für mich*.”; and 131: “das Schauen des ununterschiedenen Gleichnamigen, welches sich selbst abstößt, als unterschiedenes Inneres setzt, *aber für welches ebenso unmittelbar die Ununterschiedenheit beider ist, das Selbstbewußtsein*.”

If this is so, self-consciousness can be defined as the eternal attempt at dissolving one fundamental antithesis: on the one hand, it is aware that the domains of sensuality and perception, subjected to the idea of a simple self-identity, are nothing but a form of *appearance* – and moreover, an appearance of which consciousness itself is the author; yet on the other hand, if the truth of such appearance is the self that posits it, the self's origin is none other than the negated appearance itself. And if that is the case, self-consciousness is born out of the realisation that both sides of the opposition are in fact one and the same. The self is simultaneously the process and the result of that process. In Hegel's own words, the antithesis between appearance and truth must become *essential* for consciousness. And it is the achievement of such awareness that Hegel names, strictly speaking, *Begierde*.

*Self-consciousness is desire*, and desire is the continuous removal of the antithesis between truth and appearance, or between subject and object. In this first definition, the absolute clash between the dialectical conception of personal identity and the one endorsed by everyday consciousness is all too evident. And the difference is striking in at least three different ways.

First of all, because self-sameness no longer corresponds to the starting point from which reality is captured and recognised. Self-sameness is from the very start a dialectical phenomenon, dependent upon the founding opposition between a subject and an object. The self is always the result of a process; it is itself a process, whose result is simultaneously a new starting point. Therefore, personal identity does not represent, so to speak, a safe harbour, or an individual refuge against the otherness of the outer world. Personal identity is at first nothing more than *the desire to be oneself*, faced with a reality that is always *something else*. And this means that the very words 'identity' or 'ipseity' are misleading, since what Hegel tries to prove, against commonly held views, is that there is no such thing as self-sameness or ipseity. Insofar as it presupposes an *ipse*, that is, a self-same that remains equal to itself and acts as the measuring pattern for all otherness, the word *ipseity* still presupposes a static understanding of the phenomenon of self-identity. Self-consciousness is now, on the contrary, a self-moving entity, born out of the dialectical interchange of self-sameness and otherness.

Secondly, this new way of understanding personal identity implies a fundamental *Bedürfnis*, or *need*. Identity is not something that can be taken for granted. It has to be

conquered, again and again, at the expense of the objective world. Furthermore, the very notion of self-consciousness stems from the acknowledgement of a contradiction that has to be overcome, if personal identity is ever to emerge and recognise itself as such.

Finally, the gap between this new model and the one usually endorsed by objective consciousness is heightened by the idea that desire presupposes, by its very nature, an act of destruction. The identification of self-consciousness with itself can only come about through the elimination of objectivity. The self cannot blossom, as it were, where there is still an other to be negated and re-absorbed. And this point is particularly important, as it will stand at the basis of the *Phenomenology's* further developments. In this preliminary stage, self-consciousness can only emerge as a sovereign reality, incapable of co-existing with anything other than itself. The self-conscious *I* is always the correlate of a domination process and its existence requires the non-existence, or at least the absolute subjection of everything else. As is well known, it is upon this innate desire for domination that Hegel will ground his theories on the history of civilization, as well as his characterization of the notion of Spirit.

However, it is essential to determine, first of all, the exact nature of this domination. What does it mean, after all, to claim that self-consciousness is desire? The Hegelian definition of desire, as laid out in the *Phenomenology*, is complex and somewhat ambiguous. As we have seen, consciousness' negation of objective reality does not amount to a static or definitive process. At first, having recognised the objective reality as its own doing, self-consciousness is seized by the absolute priority of subjectivity over objectivity. It becomes aware that nothing falls out of its own self and, therefore, that everything can be led back to the tautology *I am I*. Yet, as we have also seen, this tautology is purely negative and cannot go beyond the simple statement *I am not another*. Hence, at first glance, the eternal, ever-recurring nature of this negation does not seem to depend upon the negated object, but upon the form of the negation itself. By defining itself as a non-*other*, consciousness cannot escape the dialectical movement that leads back, again and again, to the negated object.

But this is not entirely accurate. As Hegel tries to show, the circularity of the negation is also determined, and to a great extent, by the nature of the negated object. Indeed, if the object would simply correspond to an immediate or self-sufficient identity, seen through the eyes of the previous phenomenological stages, the discovery of its abstract

nature would simply lead to its disappearance. Self-consciousness would realise that the object is in fact nothing but a mirage produced by the thinking self and would discard it altogether, being left with nothing to negate. It is true that the negation itself, due to its dialectical form, would still posit a formal *other*, but that would not lead to the rekindling of desire. For the negated object, incapable of overcoming its own immediateness, would not have the strength required to restore the dialectical opposition that fuels desire. In other words, there can only be desire when the object itself is self-moving, i.e., when it is itself the result of a dialectical opposition similar to that of self-consciousness. And in Hegel's lexicon, such an object is a *living being*, moving about in the universal element of *life*. It is not an inert, self-same object, but rather a self-reflected, self-moving object, capable of arousing the interest of self-consciousness and fuelling its desire.

This far into the phenomenological progression, Hegel seems to outline something like a hierarchy of the different kinds of objects negated by self-consciousness. The lowest level corresponds to the inert domain of pure objectivity, utterly devoid of independence and therefore unable to satisfy self-consciousness' desire. The negative power of the self is directly proportional to the negative power of its objects; and in this case, the disparity is overwhelming. The weakness of the object is incapable of securing the continuous renovation of self-consciousness.

Moving on up, consciousness realises that its true object is to be found in the ever-changing element of life. Unlike the idea of simple identity which had dominated throughout the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology*, life is now perceived as an irrevocably dialectical process. Its perpetual dynamic stems from the tension between a universal flux, in which there are no real distinctions or discontinuities, and a set of differences emerging from that homogenous flux and setting themselves up as independent parts or members. The life of a living organism consists of the interchange between homogeneity and heterogeneity, between universality and individuality – or, in Hegel's own words, between 'differences as differences' (*die Unterschiede als Unterschiede*) and 'infinity as the being-subsumed of all differences' (*Unendlichkeit als das Aufgehobensein aller Unterschiede*) (Hegel 1987, 135).

Within the vital flux, both opposing moments are equally essential. On one side, the independence of a living shape cannot arise outside the global flow of life; but this flow, in turn, is nothing more than the continuous production and dissolution of independent

shapes. And this process is endless because each moment of dissolution is itself the production of a new shape. The contrast between infinity and difference is therefore only an abstraction: life is a self-moving whole which preserves itself by dividing itself and, at the same time, negating that division. Hegel's Heraclitean model repeats, at a higher phenomenological level, the absolute fluidity of Force that had stood at the centre of the Understanding stage (chapter III). As before, the mere supposition of something motionless or removed from the dialectical interchange constitutes a violation of the model at hand. In the element of life, identity is both organic and evanescent, and the interplay between individuality and universality is pervasive.

The desire of consciousness is therefore counter-balanced by the life of the object. In both instances, identity is the result of a never-ending flow uniting homogeneity and difference, a continuous interchange between the positing of a particular reality and its immediate dissolution within a universal totality. But the symmetry between desire and life renders the negation process necessary to the emergence of personal identity even more difficult. On the one hand, the concrete richness of life widens the scope of such negation. Consciousness is no longer faced with a motionless reality, but with life itself, in all its shapes and possibilities. Life injects reality, as it were, into the purely formal and still empty structure of self-consciousness. On the other hand, though, the complexity of life compromises the success of consciousness' negation. Incapable of conceiving the absolute motion of life, self-consciousness starts by reducing it to a universal category or *genus*. This category is the stable image of a universal flow in which no stability can be found. However, it is devised by consciousness as a way of synthesising life's totality and enabling its negation. This is what Hegel seems to have in mind when claiming that, for self-consciousness, 'life exists as category' (Hegel 1987, 135). However, this strategy proves unsuccessful, for if self-consciousness had been unable to assert itself through the negation of a motionless object, due to its lack of independence, things will not be different in the living world. And this is so because in this new stage, consciousness has not yet found the true object of its desire. By negating the inert objects of sense certainty and perception, and by negating afterwards the organic flow of life, consciousness has to resort to something other than itself to achieve satisfaction. But that otherness, as we have seen, is only the means through which self-consciousness returns to itself. Upon closer inspection, this means that self-consciousness is its own object and its desire is

directed towards its own self. This final acknowledgement will lead to a decisive conclusion, namely that *self-consciousness can only achieve its satisfaction in another self-consciousness*.

Let us review the argument's unfolding. Self-consciousness seeks to negate life and its ever-changing flow but that negation proves unsuccessful, as it is unable to break the circularity of desire. Indeed, if desire's satisfaction arises from the negation of its object, it is the object itself, albeit indirectly, the source of satisfaction. And therefore, if the object is gone, so too is desire – and so too is self-consciousness. Just as a living organism, for which the dissolution of the independent members is simultaneously the production of new ones, self-consciousness, by negating its object, preserves its desire and posits a new object to be negated – and so on indefinitely.

In an attempt to break this vicious cycle, already acknowledged when desire first cropped up, consciousness will search for a new object. If we were to look for an anthropological translation of Hegel's phenomenological hierarchy, it might be claimed that what is here at stake is an evolutionary history of the necessary conditions for the emergence of human self-consciousness: at the first stage, the negation of inert objects is not enough for the self to emancipate and rise above the realm of objectivity. Its true element is life, its movement and self-reflection. Secondly, the self dominates the natural world and feeds on animals and plants. But this survival instinct is still too short-sighted to bring about a true feeling of personal identity. It takes the form of an endless, inexhaustible desire, whose satisfaction leads right back to a new need, and so on until the death of the individual. In spite of fuelling organic life and securing its physiological processes, such desire is not yet the essence of human self-consciousness. The mere physical subsistence of the human organism is not what leads the individual to recognise himself as a unique, independent self-consciousness.

The circularity of desire can only be overcome through the suppression of the desired object's otherness. The object keeps on re-emerging because it is still an *other* opposed to the desiring subject. Yet by becoming aware of this continuous dependence, self-consciousness realises that the true target of its own desire is not this or that object in particular, but self-consciousness itself. Its satisfaction can only be achieved by negating another self-consciousness, equal to itself and fuelled by the same negative movement. Only through this absolute symmetry can the self become, at the same time, subject and

object, and only then can the absolute dialectical interchange of personal identity be restored.

This important development is put forward in a rather laconic manner, in one of the most decisive and, at the same time, most ambiguous moments of the whole *Phenomenology*. However, despite its apparent novelty, the movement underlying this new discovery is but a re-enactment of the same logical motif recurrent throughout the entire phenomenological progression: consciousness spots a contradiction; however, it is not yet aware that that contradiction is not a circumscribed contradiction, but a universal one, i.e., that it has to be pushed to the limit in order to be overcome. In the same way it had overcome the Perception model and discovered the notion of Force, and again when it abandoned the Understanding model and was faced with an ‘inverted world’, the truth of self-consciousness now lies in the uncovering of a hidden self-coincidence. The clash between subject and object becomes the clash between two subjects, or the clash of the same subject with itself, splitting itself up and returning to itself continuously.

In order to grasp the exact scope of this new volte-face, this second self-consciousness must not be mistaken for a new object. Indeed, this is not about replacing the natural world with the world of men, or opposing to animals and plants the specific complexity of the human organism. If that were the case, the circular logic of desire would not be broken, but simply altered through a swap of objects. The second self-consciousness is not just another man, but another self, i.e., a result of the immanent unfolding of the same self-consciousness. Only thus can it be said that the first self-consciousness, by negating the second self-consciousness, negates itself. And only thus can one claim that self-consciousness is simultaneously subject and object – that it is, for the first time, Spirit.

A self-consciousness is what it is for another self-consciousness. Only as such is it in fact self-consciousness, for only in this way does the unity of itself and its otherness become effective for it. The ‘I’ which is the object of its Notion is in fact not object; (...) A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much ‘I’ as ‘object’. And with this, the notion of *Spirit* is already available to us (...), this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence; ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’. (Hegel 1987, 139)

This turning point prompts the first true acknowledgement of the irrevocably dialectical nature of human self-consciousness. Self-consciousness does not amount to a founding identity principle or to an original core of self-sameness, but to something like a *pure reciprocity*. It is what it is insofar as it recognises another self-consciousness equal to itself, and is recognised by it. The phenomenon of identity is from the very beginning a composite phenomenon and every form of individual cognition presupposes a recognition (*Anerkennung*). According to Hegel, the lowest degree of individual consciousness is already a social relationship. The domain of inter-subjectivity is not an added domain, born out of the mutual interaction of simple self-consciousnesses, but rather the primary ground for all identity. A ground below which it is not possible to descend. That is why Hegel speaks of a *Wendungspunkt*, a turning point in the path of consciousness; and that is why the present ontological stage represents a new beginning – and, in many ways, the *true* beginning of the phenomenological progression. For if every previous chapter took for granted the pre-existence of a subject faced with an independent objective world, whatever its form or shape, the fictional nature of such presupposition is now definitively unmasked. Self-consciousness' desire for recognition is not aimed at an object but at *desire itself*. The alien desire that stands opposite its own is not satisfied with this or that objective content, but with the negation of desiring itself on the part of the opposing self-consciousness. It might be said that the standard set for consciousness' self-recognition has reached, at last, its highest point: in order for the self to recognise itself, its dominion must be absolute. Indeed, it is no longer a dominion over objects or external reality as such, but over the very movement whereby other self-consciousnesses aspire to domination. Only by negating negation itself can self-consciousness emerge, at last, in its true form.

Let us go over the consequences of this new development. As was said, what now comes to light is a complete reversal of the immediate notion of subjectivity. The practical life of consciousness is not an *a posteriori* translation of a given subjective essence, but the very root of all subjectivity. And this conclusion is especially surprising because it binds individual identity to a domain that would seem, at first sight, essentially different from it. Indeed, on this account, the entire structure of the *Phenomenology* appears paradoxical: the emergence of the practical dimension of human existence, as well as the phenomena of life and desire, is the direct result of the acknowledgement that

all consciousness is in fact self-consciousness and that the phenomenal world is entirely posited by a single, omniscient subject. But this moment of transition signals nothing less than the first true unveiling of the *Phenomenology's* entire philosophical programme: by envisaging self-consciousness as a dynamic being – or, better still, as an *infinitely* dynamic being –, Hegel tries to bridge the gap between Kant's theoretical and practical critiques. His aim is to reconcile the inescapable autism to which Kant's idealism seems to lead and the concrete character of his ethical doctrine, by showing that all Idealism is founded upon a practical movement of recognition and that only by recognising itself as the negation of a self-positing *other* can the self emerge as an individual, self-conscious being.

What Hegel seems to affirm, therefore, is the priority of the ethical over any other form of meaning. It is through social interaction that self-consciousness comes to be, and it is by reacting to another self-consciousness that the realm of meaning is first revealed. Life is from the very start an *ethical* phenomenon – or, in Hegelian terms, a *spiritual* one. And it is therefore clear that any interpretation of Hegel's hypothesis which takes for granted the pre-existence of self-consciousness is a mere return to the very misconception Hegel is trying to overcome. But that is precisely the kind of scenario we tend to fall back upon. Indeed, the claim that self-consciousness is only truly self-conscious when recognising another self-consciousness tends to be understood in a diachronic way: one consciousness comes into contact with another, but both are already consciousnesses in their own right. What the encounter brings about, then, is the addition of a new element, which neither of them previously possessed – namely, the consciousness of their own selves. According to this scenario, self-consciousness amounts to a mere ontological upgrade, or to an accidental predicate of an already posited substantial being. But this interpretation is itself a result of the objective attitude Hegel had already discarded. Its version of events is not accurate because individual identity, prior to the confrontation between both self-consciousnesses, simply does not exist. Self-identity does not correspond to a psychological or epistemological bonus, signalling a *before* and an *after* in the life of consciousness. Rather, it is the effect of an originally dialectical interchange that cannot be reduced to the immediate domain of simple identity.

Nevertheless, Hegel's notion of recognition raises a number of difficult questions. For instance, if the individual self is indeed a product of social recognition, what could be

said concerning the identity of a hermit, devoid of all inter-subjective contact?<sup>2</sup> This kind of problem requires a closer look at Hegel's concept of recognition. Does recognition stand for the mere acknowledgement that there is another self equal to my own, which is the source of a desire equal to mine? Or does it stand for a true inter-subjective relationship, whereby both selves interact and get to know one another?

'Self-consciousness is in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it is so for another; i.e. it exists only in being recognised.' (Hegel 1987, 140). Therefore, when coming across a second self-consciousness, the first self-consciousness loses and, at the same time, wins its own self. It loses itself because its identity is entirely dependent upon another and is thus held hostage by it; it wins itself because that other is not truly an other in its own right, but another *I*: a purely negative identity, or the vehicle through which individual identity can be achieved. That *other* is something like a reflecting surface – but a *necessary* reflecting surface, without which there would be no image to reflect.

As we saw earlier, the negation of otherness allows consciousness to return to itself and restore its self-coincidence. However, unlike what happened when self-consciousness first came on the scene, the recognition process became truly reciprocal. Up until now, the phenomenon of identity was regarded as a unilateral movement – the movement of an individual self opposed to otherness in general, regardless of whether that otherness stood for an inert object or a living being. And the fact that Hegel's text adopted, up to this point, a diachronic structure, is a clear sign thereof: incapable of grasping the full scope of the notion of Spirit, self-consciousness still speaks of two self-consciousnesses that 'meet' or 'come across' each other, as if such meeting were an accident, and still takes for granted the existence of self-consciousness prior to that meeting. But the confrontation with another self-consciousness shows, on the contrary, that the movement of recognition is a symmetrical movement. On the one hand, it is the first self-consciousness that brings about the negation whereby it overcomes otherness and returns to itself; but that negation is not possible if the second self-consciousness does not return, as well, to itself, giving up the other's captive identity. Each self-

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<sup>2</sup> Although in this case the imagined scenario is itself contradictory: it seems impossible to analyse the hermit's identity without breaking his isolation and, therefore, exposing him to the realm of inter-subjectivity...

consciousness re-enacts within itself the movement carried out by the other one, and only through this harmonic interaction can self-identity be secured.

## **II. The Ethical Foundation of Self-identity**

The most interesting aspect of Hegel's notion of self-identity is perhaps its direct dependence upon the domains of History and Ethics. The Hegelian grammar of identity, along with all its declensions, coincides with the historical grammar of human relations; and the following chapters of the *Phenomenology* will try to show just that: namely, that the different stages of human History correspond to the different developments of the same recognition impulse. From the Hobbesian clash between two primitive individuals to the more complex forms of social interaction – and to their corresponding roles, such as master, slave, citizen, vassal, believer, artist, philosopher, etc. –, the vast lexicon of human relations amounts to the increasing complexity of the initial confrontation between opposing self-consciousnesses. And the dialectical movement that both unites and separates them remains the same throughout the different phenomenological stages, although with a varying scope. Indeed, according to Hegel, the progression outlined in the *Phenomenology* is the history of human Spirit and all its possible shapes. And that history starts out with the realisation that individual identity is only a particular moment detached from an originally universal identity – an identity in which every individual self is, at the same time, the whole and one of its parts.

After having identified a second self-consciousness as the sole object capable of satisfying its own recognition impulse, the first self-consciousness will try to destroy it at all costs, in order to restore its own self-coincidence. This first reaction is due to the fact that self-consciousness is yet unable to realise that self-identity is not the same as self-coincidence and that the dialectical movement upon which it stands has priority over its limiting poles. Despite having acknowledged the purely dialectical nature of self-identity, consciousness will try to maintain the polarity between self-sameness and difference, in a last effort to hang on to its previous way of thinking and avoid moving on to the realm of Spirit.

Hegel's diagnosis is in many ways a reflection on what might be called, in very broad terms, the human ontological situation. His analysis starts off with the acknowledgement

that a human being is not just a living being, but a living self-consciousness. This means that unlike something that simply *is*, as a tree or an animal, human identity is founded simultaneously upon a fundamental need and a fundamental contradiction: a *need*, because its self is never truly secured; it must be continuously re-conquered, through an endless recognition cycle grounded in the domains of historical and ethical intersubjectivity. But also a *contradiction*, because the only way self-consciousness can ever hope to achieve recognition is through another self-consciousness affected by the exact same need.

This dialectical circularity is reminiscent of a central motif in Greek anthropology, and namely in Plato's views on the original dividedness of human nature, of which Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* is perhaps the best example<sup>3</sup>. And it might be useful to dwell briefly on the parallel between Aristophanes' mutilated beings – deprived from birth of one half of their bodies, but unable to realise it due to their peculiar anatomy – and Hegel's opposing self-consciousnesses – aspiring to a self-sufficiency they do not possess, but are doomed to look for. In both cases, the human self is perceived as an original and potentially insoluble contradiction. Self-identity is not strong enough to subsist as a simple phenomenon, in the form of a tautological *I am I*. And given that its own founding principle lies outside of itself, the individual *I* can never be content with mere self-coincidence. Indeed, that is why the self-sameness model is a perpetually unstable model, leading up to the series of dialectical contradictions discussed above.

Let us consider briefly the way in which both models are built. In Plato's case, Aristophanes' mythical account introduces a dichotomy between a perfect canon and an imperfect reproduction, or between an original and a copy. Man is, so to speak, a decayed totality, or a whole to which something is missing. The narrative's mythical tone stresses this point in a rather ambiguous manner, by assigning a before and an after to the history of human nature. It is true that this opposition does not have to be taken seriously, and that the diachronic structure of the narrative can be understood as a mere literary device. According to this view, Man did not start out as a totality and was afterwards, in the course of some mythical or pre-historical time, mutilated and reduced to one of his

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Plato's *Symposium* 189c-193e

composing parts. Rather, Man was from the very start the mere part of an unknown, non-existing whole. In any case, however, that part is not self-sufficient. And therein lies the paradox: on the one hand, it is all there is – or as Leibniz would put it, it is a *pars totalis*. But on the other hand, it is nothing but a *part*, i.e. the part of a whole it cannot identify but cannot help positing ahead of itself. What Plato keeps highlighting, in the *Symposium* and in many other works, is the radical contradiction between human identity's vocation and its actual existence. In the realm of existence, the actual self is outside of its natural element, afflicted by the nostalgia, as it were, of a totality that is nowhere to be found.

In this respect, Plato's dialectical method and Hegel's phenomenological method are, to a great extent, similar. Both strive to unmask consciousness' illusions of grandeur and illicit claims of self-sufficiency. That is the main goal of the *Phenomenology's* first three chapters, and it is certainly no coincidence that Hegel's analysis follows up many of the logical problems debated in dialogues such as the *Sophist*, the *Philebus* or the *Parmenides*. The *Phenomenology's* general aim is to overcome what Hegel calls the *Sophisterei des Bewußtseins*, i.e., the sophistic reasoning consciousness instinctively resorts to in order to maintain the illusion of a simple or tautological identity. At each new stage, consciousness triumphantly claims to have found a truly self-sufficient totality, and at each new dialectical transition such totality is recognised as part of a yet wider totality, which consciousness has yet to discover. But the notion of recognition, as we have seen, brings about a radical transformation of this original scheme. What is now at stake is no longer the deceptive nature of this or that ontological model, but the very consciousness of oneself as the source of those models. And likewise, Aristophanes' speech focuses on the central problem of human identity, bringing to light the radical indeterminateness underlying not only this or that conviction about the outer world, but the very ground upon which self-identity stands.

In both instances, consciousness is affected by two contradictory movements: on one side, its fixation on totality fuels its continuous effort to achieve self-sufficiency. And indeed, it might be said that the simple facts of existing, of moving about and thinking, of desiring and loving, are all immediate outcomes of that original effort. On the other side, though, consciousness contains a stationary element, on account of which it lowers its standards and settles for ontological models which do not lead to self-sufficiency, but rather to new simulacra of totality. And here, again, a parallel can be drawn between the

natural resistance opposed by Socrates' interlocutors to the corrosive effects of his questioning, and the strategies consciousness resorts to, throughout the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to prevent the collapse of the ontological models it has adopted.

This contradictory movement gives rise to a new fundamental paradox. Self-consciousness exists because it lacks something. Its incompleteness is the very force that drives its identity and its struggle for recognition. But at the same time, the acknowledgement of this shortage threatens the self's existence and leads to a paralysis, as it were, of the existential flow. And faced with this paradox, the Platonic and the Hegelian approaches finally part company: whereas Plato's Socratic method aims to highlight the second half of the paradox, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is entirely focused on the first.

In very broad terms, it might be said that one of Platonism's main concerns, along with the Attic tragic tradition and an important part of all future Philosophy, is the *defensive* nature of the natural mode of thinking (Kant's *natürliche Denkart*). Consciousness' naïve habit to overlook the contradiction that lies at the heart of its own identity is, in truth, the main condition for that identity to live on. Indeed, if consciousness were to face the abyss of its own indeterminateness, the practical structures that sustain human existence would be systematically dismantled, leading up to a sort of existential deadlock. This does not happen, however, because there seems to be a priority of existence itself over its meaning: the self must live on at all costs, even if that means distorting the theoretical premises underlying its own identity. In Hegel, though, this priority takes on a different form. It is true that consciousness, as the *Phenomenology* tries to show from the very beginning, always answers to a determinate ontological model. Consciousness *requires* a model, whichever it may be, because its existence depends upon self-determination – or, in other words, because for consciousness reality is always *this particular reality* or *that particular reality*. However, unlike the Platonic case, the different models endorsed and rejected by consciousness are not merely strategies to avoid facing a fundamental indeterminateness, but rather the very path towards the elimination of that indeterminateness. Whereas Aristophanes' mutilated beings search for a lost, primordial totality, the *Phenomenology's* consciousness has yet to come into being, and is therefore devoid of an original nature or an ἀρχαία φύσις. Although the phenomenological consciousness is, from the get-go, a totality, the ultimate acknowledgment that that is so

does not amount to the return to some long-lost ontological plenitude. In other words, the *Phenomenology*'s aim is not merely to correct consciousness' misconceptions, or to thwart the decay of an otherwise self-sufficient consciousness. Its aim is to bring about a real ontological transformation.

This idea becomes especially clear with the emergence of self-consciousness, and even more so with the clash between two rival self-consciousnesses. Instead of a consciousness afflicted with the nostalgia of a lost totality, which no human action can truly fulfil, or a decayed consciousness who is not 'at home' in the domain of human existence, the phenomenological self-consciousness is, so to speak, a being made for action. And that is what allows one to speak of an ethical foundation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The word *ethical* does not stand here for a pre-established moral doctrine, nor for a categorical imperative meant to guide consciousness throughout its formative path. In the *Phenomenology*, the priority of the ethical is the absolute priority of practical agency over its grounding reasons, as well as the inter-subjective foundation underlying each and every mode of recognition – be it epistemological or 'ethical', in the stricter sense of the word.

The priority of the ethical amounts to a Faustian call to action, but in a very particular way. The incomplete self recognises in another incomplete self the possibility of completion. However, this completion process, which anticipates Hegel's realm of Spirit, does not correspond to the restoring of an initial, undivided self. On the contrary, the *Phenomenology* aims to show that the vocation of human identity is not tautological, but *systematic* – and moreover, that it depends upon a system that opposes not only two individuals but the whole world, via a global web of recognitions and counter-recognitions. The fate of Spirit and the fate of History itself can only be attained through the discovery of a *universally systematic identity*, in which everything is dependent upon everything else – a mode of identity to which the *I* is, at last, a *We*, and vice-versa. According to Hegel, this absolute reciprocity is the only possible alternative to the decayed consciousness model, whose aporetic nature the Platonic tradition forcefully highlighted.

It is easy to see, therefore, that every partial fulfilment of the Hegelian project amounts, in fact, to a complete unfulfillment. All of self-consciousness' attempts to attain completion that fail to reach a truly systematic mode of identity are eternally haunted by

the presupposition of some sort of epistemological or theoretical foundation, prior to inter-subjective recognition – i.e., the very foundation Hegel claims not to exist. And in this ever-recurring paradox lie both the boldness and the fragility of Hegel’s phenomenological enterprise, as well as the source of its extraordinary actuality. By transferring the reciprocity model characteristic of the interplay of forces (chapter III) to the heart of self-consciousness, Hegel comes up with an entirely new way of envisaging the notion of authority. And the most important feature of the ensuing clash between a master and a slave will be the acknowledgement that the authority of both is not essential, nor does it depend upon an external substantial attribute. The authority stems from a blind demand for recognition, prior to all the specific phenomenological semblances it will come to adopt. Indeed, what prompts the master to dominate the slave and the slave to submit to the master is the same aspiration to systematic identity already uncovered in the beginning of the chapter: *every self-consciousness, in order to be a self-consciousness, must be recognised as such*. And that recognition does not amount to the mere confirmation of an already existing state of affairs, that must be externalised or made public. That recognition is, on the contrary, the very movement whereby self-consciousness comes into being.

If this is so, the notion of authority, as we tend to understand it, is completely transformed. The authority of a given self-consciousness is recognised by another self-consciousness, but it is that very movement of recognition that grants the first self-consciousness its authority – and vice-versa. Both self-consciousnesses demand the recognition of the very fact that they are recognised, in such a way that their authority does not derive from any substantial quality, prior to the demand<sup>4</sup>. They do not recognise each other *on account of this* or *on account of that*, but for the very fact that they are what they are – or, better said, in order to be able to be what they are.

The irrevocably relational structure of authority points back, yet again, to the Platonic diagnosis. What Hegel seems to affirm, ultimately, is the inexistence of a fixed foundation upon which to ground practical agency. If human existence is, from the very

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<sup>4</sup> Pippin alludes briefly to this problem, which he labels “recognitional paradox” (Pippin 2011, 76). The importance of this way of envisaging the notion of authority, as well as its influence in philosophical and political post-Hegelian thought is noticeable, for example, in Kojève’s *La notion d’autorité*.

beginning, an ethical phenomenon, it is pointless to look for an epistemological or even metaphysic *substratum* prior to the practical domain of action. For if that were possible, no phenomenology, in the Hegelian sense of the word, would be required: the domain of action would be merely added, *ex post facto*, to the domain of truth (or, at least, of some sort of cognitive certainty). Ethics would therefore correspond to an adjective domain, or to the practical translation of an already established theoretical principle. And human consciousness, possessing a truly epistemic outlook, would only have to ask itself ‘what to do?’ or ‘how to act?’. But this division of domains is purely fictional. The human self is forced to act and only afterwards, through that action, can it devise cognitive models to support it.

However, Hegel’s aim is not simply to highlight this fundamental paradox and its apparent insolubility. His solution, as we have seen, consists of a universal actualisation of the recognition model, i.e. the reciprocal inter-relation of all self-consciousnesses, or the emergence of a so-called a *Universal Spirit*. Therefore, from chapter IV onwards, the entire *Phenomenology* can be read as the long transformation process whereby consciousness comes to acknowledge the ethical foundation of self-identity.

In the beginning, consciousness is convinced that the recognition movement of which it is, at the same time, agent and patient, is grounded on some unknown theoretical principle. And the search for that founding principle will fuel its journey throughout the different phenomenological stages – from the outcome of the slave’s labour, acknowledged as the foundation of the phenomena of desire and authority, to the citizen’s duty within the Greek *πόλις*; from Enlightened Reason’s aspirations to pure knowledge to Christianity’s promised redemption, etc., etc. All along the phenomenological pathway, consciousness looks for a steady ground on which to anchor its action; a foundation that won’t shake, as all the previous ones, under the scrutiny of a finer philosophical analysis – in other words, something *for which* and *on account of which* consciousness can live. But the *Phenomenology*’s tale, with its recurring ontological crises, will show in the end that no foundation can provide, *per se*, such stability. The lability that afflicts human consciousness cannot be stopped short, as it were, by a definitive explanatory model. And therefore, human action cannot be annexed to this or that abstract ideal. The human self is, by its own nature, a need for recognition – and that is, ultimately, its only truth.

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