RECOGNITION AND THE SELF IN
HEGEL’S PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is famed for its account of the problem of recognition. Yet while readers agree about the importance of its influential accounts of the struggle to the death and the master/slave relation in developing that problem, there is no consensus regarding what sorts of relations among subjects would count as successful forms of recognition. Timothy L. Brownlee articulates the essential connections between Hegel’s concepts of recognition and the self, and presents a novel interpretation of the *Phenomenology* that traces the emergence of actual relations of reciprocal recognition through the work as a whole. He focuses on the distinctive social constitution conception of the self that Hegel develops in his account of “spirit,” and demonstrates that the primary significance of recognition lies in its contribution to self-knowledge. His book will be valuable for scholars and students interested in Hegel, German Idealism, and philosophical conceptions of recognition.

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For my parents, J. Hugh and Janet Brownlee
Then Polemarchus said, Socrates, you seem to me to be headed towards town, as though you’re leaving.
You don’t opine badly, I said.
Do you see us, he said, how many we are?
How couldn’t I?
So become stronger than these men, he said, or stay here.
Isn’t there, I said, still the option that we persuade you it’s necessary for us to leave?
Would you really be able, he said, to persuade us if we don’t listen?

Plato, Republic, 327c

The position is this: This is my first appearance in a lawcourt, at the age of seventy; I am therefore simply a stranger to the manner of speaking here. Just as if I were really a stranger, you would certainly excuse me if I spoke in that dialect and manner in which I had been brought up, so too my present request seems a just one, for you to pay no attention to my manner of speech—be it better or worse—but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth.

Plato, Apology, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. John Cooper, 17d-18a
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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book addresses two of the principal themes of G. W. F. Hegel’s 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*, those of recognition and the self. It aims to demonstrate that, for Hegel, these two phenomena are tightly intertwined.

You and I stand in the relation of recognition (*Anerkennen*) to one another when my activities of “recognizing” you are guided by a conception of what you are, so that those activities generate a new condition for you, being-recognized. Recognition is, Hegel argues, a vital need for creatures like ourselves. But that need is not, like our needs for food and shelter, rooted in features of ours that are merely natural. Rather, the activities of recognizing and being recognized by others are so important because they make it possible for us to arrive at a specific kind of knowledge, *self*-knowledge.

Our capacity to recognize and be recognized by others is grounded in a basic element of our constitution, the fact that we are *self-conscious*. Self-knowledge is possible only for self-conscious beings like you and me. As a self-conscious being, I am able to learn and know about myself by taking up distinct relations to various objects that are different from me. For example, I learn my tastes in music, what I find satisfying to hear, by listening to different types of music and reflecting on my experiences of them. Among the most important sorts of objects that can contribute to self-knowledge are other self-conscious beings, beings like you. While there is a variety of different ways in which we can relate to others – for example, loving or hating them, dominating or venerating them, obsessing over them or ignoring them, among a myriad of others – Hegel singles out relations of recognition between self-conscious beings as the most significant for arriving at self-knowledge. The self-knowledge that relations of recognition make possible is unique because it is not just the knowledge that I might come to have of my particular attitudes and states, or even my particular tastes or interests, but rather a much more general sort of knowledge, knowledge of the sort of being that I am.
Of course, in some sense, it’s easy enough to identify the sort of being that I am. After all, I’ve already stated that I am a being who is self-conscious. But I’ve also acknowledged that I’m not the only being who is like that, since you are self-conscious too. One reason that recognition comprises such an important form of knowledge is because it entails an acknowledgment of a deep and important kind of equality between us, the fact that we are both self-conscious beings. Indeed, Hegel thinks that part of the essence of recognition lies in the fact that it is a relation that is, in principle, reciprocal: When I recognize you, you can also recognize me. We might object that there are various forms of recognition that are not and cannot be reciprocal, for instance forms of recognition in which I honor you for your superior achievement and abilities, or, to take Hegel’s famous example, the sort of recognition that a bondsman gives to their lord. However, there is an important sense in which these forms of one-sided recognition are actually dependent for their significance on an implicit equality of the parties involved. It would be silly for me to care about the recognition of my musical abilities from nonmusicians (what do they really know about shredding?), just as the recognition of the bondsman is, in an important sense, meaningless for the lord, coming as it does from a being he deems inferior. What the lord really seeks from the bondsman (and the musician from the nonmusician) is probably not recognition, but rather easy pleasure, or a sense of power, or some other such good.

The link between recognition, on the one hand, and reciprocity or equality, on the other, stems from an important connection between practices of recognition and the existence of the self. The equality implicit in relations of recognition is ultimately an equality grounded in our shared constitution as selves. I will succeed in recognizing you only to the extent that my activities reflect a correct understanding of who you are. For this reason, I say more when I identify you as a self than I do when I simply identify you as a self-conscious being. Being self-conscious is, of course, essential to you. You would be a very – we could say entirely – different sort of creature if you were not self-conscious. But self-consciousness alone by no means exhausts what you are, and it does not, by itself, give me much guidance in determining how I might successfully recognize you. Indeed, Hegel goes so far as to say that self-consciousness alone is an empty form that is nothing positive in itself, only an “absolute negativity.” To be sure, this absolute negativity is very important for you to be the sort of being that you are, since in a sense it elevates you above everything that you encounter, enabling you to separate and distinguish yourself from everything else. Of course, it may not be a comforting thought...
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to acknowledge that we all harbor a sort of abyss, a basically negative and destructive capacity, at the heart of our very being. But your capacity to distance yourself from what is merely given and positive is at once the source of your capacity for transformation, not only of the world as you merely find it, but also of yourself. Because of this negativity, both you and your world can become something they are not yet.

The fact that we are self-conscious beings is the source of our need for recognition, since it is through establishing the right sorts of relations to others that we are capable of positive self-knowledge. But that fact is also the source of one of the greatest challenges to achieving recognition, since it is unclear how we ought to go about recognizing a being that is, at its core, nothing positive. Of course, we are never – or almost never – in a situation where we are faced only with this radical negativity of the other. Instead, we find ourselves along with others sharing a world. And that world is not merely a collection of objects, but is rather a human world, structured by shared norms that establish joint expectations for how we will and ought to act, and that provide the terms through which we make sense of ourselves and one another. That world is also a sort of project, a shared venture whose continued existence depends on us all taking its demands seriously, producing and reproducing it through our joint activity. Hegel’s idea of “spirit” (Geist) is, initially at least, just the idea of the unity (or rather reciprocal dependence) comprising self-conscious beings and their shared social world. And because of the ways in which our shared practices help us to make sense of and understand ourselves, Hegel reserves the term “the self” (das Selbst) to refer to the sorts of beings who understand themselves through that shared participation.

In understanding the self in this way – to use the terminology that I develop in what follows, in understanding the self as socially constituted – Hegel is pushing against what is I think a common, intuitive understanding of what the self is. According to this understanding, the self is something that exists independent of and prior to the shared social world, a secure property belonging to the individual, that may appear in social form in particular instances, but whose existence doesn’t depend on those appearances. By contrast, for Hegel, we do have a sort of existence independent of relations to others, but that is our existence as self-conscious beings, which, as we’ve seen, Hegel thinks is grounded in nothing positive. Instead, we become selves only through our engagement in shared practices, even the mundane and prosaic practices of day-to-day social life. But that entails that my existence as a self is not an invulnerable guarantee, but rather a product of a shared activity that also requires you.
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You and I both become selves through engagement in the shared social world, which means that we both assume a unique equal or universal status as participants in that world, even as we each seek the unique forms of engagement in which we find individual fulfillment, that is, meaningful activities that give adequate expression to the things that we think are important.

As I’ve described it so far, this might not sound like the social world that you know. Many of the activities in which we are required to engage might seem to be completely meaningless, or nearly so, so that it can be challenging to see how they could be sources of fulfillment. Moreover, many of the central institutions of social life are exclusive, unjustly limiting participation on the basis of arbitrary distinctions of gender, race, ability, or class, or instituting basic inequalities on the basis of those distinctions. Instead of linking the existence of the self to any particular institution – like that of the state, or a profession, or the market, or the family – Hegel instead shows that it is through participation in moral discourse, the practice of giving expression to the deeply held convictions that we realize through our actions, that we come to exist as selves. Moral discourse gives expression to concerns that matter to me, and to my own insight and knowledge, so that I can find myself expressed in moral action and speech. At the same time, what distinguishes moral discourse from the expression of my particular tastes or idiosyncratic interests is the fact that I expect others to agree with what I express, since morality concerns matters that are (or ought to be) of importance to everyone. Hegel designates this moral conception of the self, in which you exist as a self through acting on and expressing your convictions to others, “conscience.”

We can now see that the two principal phenomena on which this book will dwell, recognition and the self, actually presuppose one another. First, it is only when you and I share a common conception of the self – in particular, it is only when we both orient our activities according to the norms implicit in the idea of conscience – that it is possible for us to recognize one another. Of course, it is always possible for us to fail to act according to those norms. When I ignore the claims that you make on and before me about what it is right to do, or when I dismiss you as not fully competent to make those claims, I fail to treat you as conscientious, and so make it impossible for you to be recognized. However, second, we can also see that the existence of the self actually depends on the recognition of others. This dependence is most visible in cases where we treat one another as conscientious, but still fail to come to agreement with respect to the convictions that we
express in our actions and speech. The failure to reach agreement on matters of the highest importance, moral matters, drives a wedge between us, and undermines the equality that is central to the idea of the self. In such cases, I might have a profound experience of the singularity of selfhood, of the inescapable fact that I am (as Hegel says) this self. However, what is lacking is the other essential pole of selfhood, its being shared with others who are also selves, or (as Hegel puts it) the “continuity” with others that arises from the shared or “universal” dimension of our being.

The practices of recognizing and being recognized by others and our existence as selves therefore depend on one another. As a result, we can see why Hegel would link recognition and self-knowledge in the way that he does. What you are is not simply a natural or transcendental fact about you, one that holds irrespective of your relations to others. Instead, your existence as a self is something that is made and remade through your joint engagement in a shared social world. And since my existence as a self is only secured through my own participation in moral discourse – of giving expression to my convictions about what is right, realizing those convictions in action, and judging conscientiously the like actions and expressions of others – I can only arrive at self-knowledge, knowledge not only of my particular existence as this singular self, but knowledge of the general sort of being that I am, through the practices of recognizing and being recognized by others.

This fundamental link between recognition and selfhood means that our existence as selves is subject to a very basic ontological vulnerability. We might rue that vulnerability and seek refuge from it by attempting to carve off a dimension of the self that is insulated from the doubt and desolation that can arise when we find ourselves at odds with and so cut off from others. If Hegel is right, such efforts are bound to fail. To be sure, there is an important dimension of my being that is not so dependent on others; but there is nothing “positive” there, nothing that could, by itself, lend direction and meaning to my life. Instead, being a self requires that we embrace our relations to others, even with the knowledge of the risks attendant on that embrace. Just as importantly, being conscientious requires acknowledging our answerability to the requirements of morality, both in our actions but also in our judgments of others. Being a self, for Hegel, means endeavoring to answer in earnest to those requirements, an endeavor that will require transformation, both of the world, when we find that the way things are falls short of the way that they should be, and of ourselves, when we find that we have failed to live up to our highest aspirations.
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Abbreviations

I have used the following abbreviations for works by Hegel:


I have used the following abbreviations for works by other authors:


Unless otherwise noted, translations from the German are my own.