Recognition and Political Ontology: Fichte, Hegel, and Honneth

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ABSTRACT
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The primary focus of my dissertation is to defend the notion of recognition, found in the work of such thinkers as G.W.F. Hegel and Axel Honneth, as a primary concept in contemporary political discourse by emphasizing its ontological foundations. At its most basic, the notion of recognition states that the way one understands her or him-self to be a conscious subject and a full political agent is only through being acknowledged as such by another. Likewise, one must simultaneously reciprocate this acknowledgement in order for both to be elevated to the position of full subject.

The general problem is that the concept of recognition has come under heavy attack from several different theoretical angles. These criticisms state that the recognitive project reifies the notion of identity in much too strong a way; that recognition alone cannot account for power differences because it focuses so heavily on identity; and that recognitive theory believes that all experiences and ways of being in the world can be recognized and therefore understood in some way, which is simply not the case. These criticisms are primarily directed at Honneth’s idea of recognition.

I argue that if we follow Honneth with no modification, the criticisms that have been articulated above become substantial threats to the project as a whole. I believe that this is the case due to his heavily empirical leanings. It is for this reason that I shift the focus away from Honneth’s empirical leanings, which are indispensable but represent only a single side of the coin, in order to ground recognition in a Hegelian-inspired ontology. Ontology is the study of the basic structures that constitute reality, which in this case means structures that must be in place in order to have conscious human beings. I thus show that recognition is that which makes it possible to have a notion of subjectivity as such – we can only have human subjects in and through the process of mutual recognition. Understanding recognition in this manner allows us to avoid the above-mentioned criticisms.
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Chapter One:

Axel Honneth and Recognition Theory

Introduction:

The concept of “recognition,” first developed by German Idealist philosophers J.G. Fichte and G.W.F. Hegel, came to prominence once again in the early 1990's in the work of critical theorist Axel Honneth and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. It has become one of the key terms, if not the key term, for understanding the nature of social struggle and what is commonly referred to as “identity politics” in the English-speaking world. At its most basic, the notion of recognition states that the way one becomes a conscious subject and a full political agent is only through being recognized as such by another. Likewise, one must simultaneously reciprocate this acknowledgment in order for both to be elevated to the position of full subject.

What must be emphasized here is that this is not a static relationship understood as an exchange of a certain “product” we possess, in this case recognition, but rather as a dynamic interplay between countless subjects. It must also be emphasized that there simply is no such thing as a fully-fledged subject that encounters another until the process of recognition has taken place. What this means is that the process of recognition begins immediately once a human being is born. That is, in order for the infant to develop into a subject who understands herself as a subject, a process of recognition must take place between the caretaker (usually the mother) and the child. As Honneth points out in *Reification and Recognition*, human cognition is dependent upon and only comes after a process of recognition (RR, 40).
Navigating between the traditional notions of justice and rights common to the liberal political tradition on the one hand, and notions of class struggle, redistribution and community more common with Marxism and communitarianism on the other hand, the politics of recognition attempts to show how neither can adequately account for the political ills of the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century. The general thrust of the argument for recognition theory in contemporary debates is that by focusing solely on the notion of equal rights, or focusing solely on the notion of class struggle, we trample on claims concerning identity and common history that have caused grave injustices and that cannot be fixed simply by granting individual rights or redistributing resources. Thus, recognition stands at the crossroads between the liberalism and communitarianism (although I will argue that the theory has a tendency to lean toward communitarianism because of some of its most basic features).

Overall, the aim of this chapter is threefold. I first show how Honneth develops the theory of recognition. In order to do so, I will be concentrating primarily on his major work on the topic: \textit{The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts}. I will supplement my reading of Honneth, elucidating certain points where necessary, with some of his earlier essays found in \textit{The Critique of Power} and \textit{The Fragmented World of the Social}, and with some of his most recent work, especially \textit{Reification and Recognition} and, to a somewhat lesser extent, \textit{The I in We}. The reason for starting with Honneth is because his work has been crucial for bringing “recognition” back into contemporary discourse. As Bert van den Brink and David Owen point out in their introduction to the volume \textit{Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory}, “the research paradigm that Honneth has developed is widely
acknowledged as both an empirically insightful way of reflecting on emancipatory struggles…and a powerful way of generating a conception of justice and the good that permits the normative evaluation of such struggles” (1). That is, if it had not been for Honneth's work, which takes empirical studies as well as normative evaluations of social struggle under consideration, it could very well have been that “recognition” remained confined to debates within journals on the history of German thought.

The second aim of the chapter is to illustrate why recognition is so crucial to contemporary political debates. I will simply develop this point through my exegesis of Honneth's work. As it was stated above, recognition allows us to avoid some of the pitfalls of both the liberal and communitarian traditions, and, furthermore, it successfully navigates through and incorporates insights from neo-Aristotelianism, Kantianism, as well as utilitarianism (Zurn, 4).

Finally, I will begin to do what is ultimately the aim of the dissertation as a whole: I will criticize Honneth's dismissal of metaphysics/ontology. Following the general thrust of critical theory, which has always attempted to provide a theory of society through a mixture of the social sciences and a Marxian-inspired materialism, Honneth is dismissive and distrustful of metaphysics. I will argue that his dismissal of metaphysics is both unwarranted and detrimental to recognition theory. Ultimately, as I will be arguing all throughout the dissertation as a whole, it is really ontology, understood in Hegelian terms, that grounds the recognitive project and not simply empirical reflections (it will become clear what I mean by ontology as we work through the various thinkers). Furthermore, I will criticize Honneth's point that recognition leads to what he dubs a “formal conception of ethical life.” He tells us that “a formal conception of ethical life encompasses the
qualitative conditions of self-realization that, insofar as they form the general
prerequisites for the personal integrity of subjects, can be abstracted from the plurality of
all particular forms of life” (SR, 175). I will argue that this is in fact both impossible and
undesirable from within a recognitive framework. That is, recognition necessarily leads
us to take into account all the concreteness of ethical life, not to abstract from it. What
this effectively means is that we must do the exact opposite of what Honneth proposes:
we must posit a relatively thick conception of the good if we don't simply want to be led
back to a sort of communicative liberalism that is advocated by Jürgen Habermes (which
is precisely a position that Honneth wants to avoid).

Honneth's Argument for Recognition

In the introduction to a volume of essays titled The Fragmented World of the
Social, Honneth tells us that his turn to recognition was a way for him to provide a
critique of critical social theory, which he believes has lost some of its power to address
contemporary social problems in light of the ever-changing nature of our world. He also
wanted to bring in a more overarching, systematic paradigm to guide critical theory
(FWS, xi). In order to provide this critique he turns to the work of Hegel, who posits
recognition as the central concepts of political and social life after having worked through
Fichte. “In order, though, while undertaking a reconstruction of Hegel's philosophy, to
avoid falling into the dangers of unwittingly incorporating his metaphysical premises, I
have more or less at the same time undertaken the project of subjecting to independent
critical examination the few post-Hegelian, and thus ‘materialistic,’ outlines for a struggle
for recognition1” (FWS, xv). Thus, we see here that although Honneth wants to place recognition at the very center of all political questions, and especially those that involve struggle, he seeks at the same time to divest recognition of its metaphysical foundation.

The start of his project, which I will further elaborate upon in chapter three of the dissertation when I work through Hegel's early Jena writings, is an exegesis of Hegel's early work. What Honneth presents us with in his text The Struggle for Recognition is, in his own estimation, an empirical re-formulation of the project of the early Hegel. Honneth relies on the work of George Herbert Mead, as well as more current research in psychoanalysis and sociology, in order to empirically develop the three facets of recognition found in the early Hegel: love, rights, and solidarity or esteem (which corresponds to the family, civil society and ethical life in the later Hegel). The reason for turning to the early Hegel, according to Honneth, is because Hegel had reformulated the original conception the state of nature found in such thinkers as Hobbes, where one gets a picture of the atomistic individual always fighting for scarce resources, into an analysis of a 'struggle for recognition.' In this struggle, what one finds is not atomistic, fully developed human beings fighting over scarce resources, but rather beings who can understand themselves as humans and bearers of rights only when they mutually recognize each other as such. What this conception of humanity allows us to do, then, is to rethink the foundations of political theory and develop a fuller understanding of how and why social struggles play out the way they do. As Honneth tells us, the guiding thesis of his work is that “the moral force within lived social reality that is responsible for development and progress is a struggle for recognition” (SR, 143).

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1 The “materialistic” outlines include the work of G.H. Mead and Jean-Paul Sartre.
2 These include his earliest work in the Critique of Power, explicitly devoted to reformulating critical theory in light of Foucault's understanding of power; The Fragmented World of the Social, where Honneth
Since I will examine Hegel's work myself in chapter three, I will not go into the details of Honneth's own exegesis here. Instead, I would like to focus on Honneth's unique contribution to recognition theory, especially as it is found in *The Struggle for Recognition* (with some supplements from *Reification and Recognition* and his various essay collections).  

Generally speaking, liberalism begins with the assumption of fully formed agents engaged in a struggle for scarce natural resources. This struggle leads either to a non-ideal social arrangement, as is the case in the work of John Locke, or a full-out war of all against all in the work of Thomas Hobbes. The way the struggle ceases is for the agents to come together and reach an agreement, the social contract, to cease hostilities and submit to being governed in order to curtail the extreme conditions found in the state of nature.

Like Hobbes and Locke, Honneth argues that struggle is in fact at the heart of social and political life, but the struggle is not at all like the one described by Hobbes and Locke. Rather, the struggle is for recognition from others. What is simultaneously recognized and developed is one's sense of subjectivity, identity, and self-worth. “Human beings' moral subjectivity and agency stand in need of the recognitive relations of care, respect, and esteem with others in all phases and spheres of life” (Van den Brink and Owen, 3). The core relationship of mother and child facilitates the healthy (or unhealthy) development of infant and child during the early years, and then similar love relationships with others are necessary for flourishing in later life. In the social sphere respect amounts

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2 These include his earliest work in the *Critique of Power*, explicitly devoted to reformulating critical theory in light of Foucault's understanding of power; *The Fragmented World of the Social*, where Honneth first begins to articulate his theory of recognition; and *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. 
to the recognition of one's universal human rights, what each of us ought to have simply by virtue of being human. The denial of recognition in this sphere leads to a very real and quite apparent stifling of one's agency. We can simply look at the suffrage or Civil Rights movements in the United States to see how the struggle for recognition has played out when it comes to respect. Finally, solidarity or esteem is all about having one's achievements, one's line of work for example, recognized as worthy by others. One does the same for others in a complex way of recognitive interplay. These three spheres are meant to represent, and to empirically supplement, the three recognitive spheres that were found in the work of the early Hegel: family, civil society and ethical life, which are treated here under the heading “love,” “rights,” and “social esteem.” Let us begin by examining how Honneth develops each one of these positions.

Love

Honneth's first point of departure is to take the early work in Hegel and run it through the work of social psychologist G.H. Mead in order “to give Hegel's theory as a 'struggle for recognition' a 'materialistic' reformulation” (Honneth, SR, 92). Without much in the way of substitute argumentation, Honneth states that the development in Post-Hegelian philosophy, especially in thinkers such as Marx, Feuerbach, and Kierkegaard has shown the weakness and failures of the idealist metaphysical tradition, rendering its metaphysical foundation completely untenable in the 20th (and now 21st) century (SR, 68). What this means for Honneth is that if a theory of recognition is to be made viable in

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3 It should be pointed out that the later Hegel develops these notions much further, and arguably much better in the Philosophy of Right. Honneth has recognized this recently and has incorporated in his newer work, The I in We, which I will examine in part when developing Hegel's later recognitive arguments in chapter four.
the 21st century, it must abandon the metaphysical premises which it was initially grounded on and instead be founded on new, empirical, and materialistic foundations. All of this is very much in line with his critical theory background since the movement rests on the foundation of empirical sociology/psychology and Marxist materialism. Thus, the figure who allows Honneth to bridge the 19th century metaphysician to the present is early 20th century social psychologist G.H. Mead. Honneth tells us that:

Nowhere is the idea that human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition more thoroughly developed on the basis of naturalistic presuppositions than in the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. Even today, his writings contain the most suitable means for reconstructing the intersubjectivist intuitions of the young Hegel within a postmetaphysical framework (SR, 71).

What Honneth explicitly wants to do here is to ground recognition purely in the natural and social sciences. Mead does this through his studies of subjectivity, especially as it is found in human development. He argues that the basis of intersubjectivity (i.e. the idea that subjects only develop in a social context) is found through perceiving oneself and one's action through a second-person perspective. What this means is that during the early stages of development, the child can only understand her or himself as a conscious subject through the use of an inherited language and through imagining the actions and gestures of the parent. Mead writes: “The child can talk about his conduct as good or bad only as he reacts to his own acts in the remembered words of his parents” (Mead, 61).

Mead is explicitly fighting the notion that subjectivity and human psychology can somehow be studied in isolation. He tells us that “other selves in a social environment
logically antedate the consciousness of self which introspection analyzes” (Mead, 51). That is, one cannot simply study psychology by “looking inwards”, attempting to try to make an analogy between one's own experience and the experience at others, but, rather, that one would not even be capable of having internal experience outside a social framework. Thus, for Mead psychology is necessarily social psychology.

In order to make this explicitly clear, Mead draws a distinction between the “I” and the “me.” The “me” is understood as a social object: that which is developed in and through the interaction of others, and the “I” is understood, in somewhat Kantian terms, as subjectivity. Both are necessary to have a fully developed human being, and the process by which we develop both the “I” and “me” is one of recognition. Thus, Mead writes:

The stuff that goes to make up the “me” whom the “I” addresses and whom he observes, is the experience which is induced by this action of the “I”. If the “I” speaks, the “me” hears. If the “I” strikes, the “me” feels the blow. Here again the “me” consciousness is of the same character as that which arises from the action of the other upon him. That is, it is only as the individual finds himself acting with reference to himself as he acts towards others, that he becomes a subject rather than an object, and only as he is affected by his own social conduct in the manner in which he is affected by that of others, that he becomes an object to his own social conduct (Mead, 59).

Similarity to what Hegel writes in the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* preceding the master/slave dialectic, Mead argues that subjectivity develops through an encounter
with other subjects. The “me” is the aspect of the self that is the objective. It is that which is formed with reference to others. One's language, personality, and so forth, is developed through interaction with others. This Mead calls a social object. But, “behind” the social object lies the subject, the “I.” The “I,” or subjectivity itself, is necessary for the “me,” but the “I” is not directly experienced in the same way as the “me.”

With this basic framework in mind, which is naturalized because Mead's starting points include the study of language and child development, Honneth looks to broaden his notion of love by looking at the work of Donald Winnicott (he also refers to the work of Jessica Benjamin, although to a lesser extent). The reason for starting with the love relationship, which is also where Hegel begins in the early Jena writings, is that it is where the individual initially develops, especially in the bond between parent and child.

According to Honneth, the basic starting point that Winnicott has is a recognitive one. Winnicott thought that studying the infant in isolation from the primary care-giver, usually the mother, during the early months of development is next to useless (Honneth, SR 98). The reason for this is simply because the child is entirely dependent on the care of the “mother” (Honneth's quotes, which I will continue to use). As such, the basic relationship between “mother”/child at this point is one of symbiosis. A category of “absolute dependence” is introduced here. Honneth tells us that “here, both partners to interaction are entirely dependent on each other for the satisfaction of their needs and are incapable of individually demarcating themselves from each other” (SR, 99). The reason for this is because the mother gives up all her energy for care of the helpless child, who was basically a part of her during the nine months of pregnancy, and the infant is incapable of taking care of itself or differentiating self from environment early on. What
Winnicott then wants to figure out is how infant and “mother” relinquish the symbiotic relationship developed during the first few months and understand each other as independent persons (SR, 98).

The process of relinquishing the symbiotic relationship is understood as a struggle for recognition. Somewhere around the six month period, the infant begins to be able to see the “mother” as an independent person (SR, 100). The reason that this is understood is a struggle for recognition is because “in response to the gradually acquired awareness of a restricted reality, the infant soon begins to act aggressively, primarily toward the 'mother', who is now perceived by the child to be independent herself. As if to rebel against the loss of omnipotence, the infant attempts to destroy her body – which, until then, had been experienced as a source for pleasure – by hitting, biting, and kicking it” (SR, 101). That is, there is a literal struggle on the part of the infant against the growing independence of the “mother” and the infant’s own growing independence. It is precisely through this struggle, which is at the one hand symbolic and also quite literal, that the infant is able to relinquish the symbiotic relationship with the mother, because the mother (of course) survives and continues on, the infant is able to perceive her as an independent subject.

Honneth tells us that “if the ‘mother’ survives these destructive acts without taking revenge, the child has thereby, in a manner of speaking, actively placed himself or herself into a world in which he or she exists alongside other subjects” (SR, 101). Because the child has done this, she or he can love the “mother” without being resentful of the fact that she cannot be attached to her or him all the time. Thus, the struggle for recognition as

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4 Jessica Benjamin explicitly understands it as such, which is why Honneth includes her in the discussion even though he devotes more time to explaining Winnicott.
the early stage of child development is a necessary pre-condition for the development of subjectivity as well as all other love relationships later on in life. As Honneth points out, it is “conceptually and genetically prior to every other form of reciprocal recognition” (SR, 107). In Reification and Recognition, Honneth expands on this notion by further arguing that we must understand this genetic priority to occur because of the emotional attachment that the child makes to the parent. That is, he wants to move the initial recognitive moves away from a cognitivist model because the child does not initially have cognitive capacities\(^5\) (RR, 43). In order for the child to even develop their cognitive capacities, which happens somewhere around the nine month period, they must first go through a recognitive process that is fundamentally emotional. Thus, there can be no such thing as cognition or subjectivity without there being recognition (RR, 42).

This initial developmental model must then be carried over to other avenues in life during adulthood. We of course know that not every love relationship is like to the one between caregiver and child, but this relationship serves as the foundation for all other love relationships. Without first learning how to love and be recognized during infancy and early childhood, one cannot really love later in life. The other love relationships include friendship, bonds between siblings and other family members, and erotic relationships. All of these function in a slightly different manner, but all have recognition of the other as their foundation. According to Honneth, the basic foundation of all love relationships is a complex interplay between the desire for completely merging with the other and the realization that the other is an independent being (SR, 105). For

\(^5\) I believe that this move is quite crucial for any form of recognitive theory because it moves us even further away from any atomistic conceptions of human beings. It is not fully formed agents that encounter each other in the world and recognize each other, which is sort of the way that Fichte makes it sound, but rather the process itself must occur first in order for there to be anything that resembles a human being at all.
example, in an erotic love relationship the overwhelming need to be completely with the other can be navigated in a healthy way only with the realization that this is not in fact literally possible. The person who is loved is an independent being, and they reciprocate the love partially by wanting to be with the other and partially by allowing the other to be; that is, by recognizing that the other is an independent subject with his or her own interests. Even conventional wisdom scoffs at those couples who cannot separate from one another in any way possible. This type of relationship is destructive and never quite reaches the level of love because it ignores the need for some level of independence. After all, love becomes meaningless if the boundary between two people actually dissolves.

When we think of friendships and relationships between siblings or parents and children later in life, recognition plays an essential role. One becomes a person by one’s interaction with those who are closest around oneself, and, as we saw above with Mead, they shape who we are while we at the same time shape who they are. A personality is not something that is given at birth – it develops though actions of a person and reactions from those around us. Thus, who I am is a product of what I do and how others see my actions and reflect them back to me. We already have something like this notion in Aristotle when he argues that “a friend is another self” in the final two books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. This does not mean that there is a literal merger of people or personalities, since this wouldn’t be love, but simply that *without friends we cannot become selves* because we need the recognition of our deeds, both good and bad, and these deeds are meaningless if they are not performed in social context.

Honneth summarizes his discussion of love by writing:
If love can be said to represent a symbiosis refracted by mutual individuation, then, in loving, what one recognizes in the other is evidently only the other’s individual independence. Thus, it might be thought that the love relationship is characterized solely by a type of recognition involving the cognitive acceptance of the other’s independence. That this this is not the case can already be seen in the fact that this release into independence has to be supported by an affective confidence in the continuity of shared concern. Without the felt assurance that the loved one will continue to care even after he or she has become independent, it would be impossible for the loving subject to recognize that independence. Because this experience must be mutual in love relationships, recognition is here characterized by a double process, in which the other is released and, at the same time, emotionally tied to the loving subject (SR, 107).

Thus, we see here that at the most basic level of humanity one comes to be a subject in the full sense of the term only through loving interactions with others that begin at childhood and follow us throughout life. This means that we are simultaneously a creature dependent on others for our emotional and physical needs, and also an independent subject. This seeming contradiction is navigated though recognition. I can only come to the realization that I am this kind of being by the process of mutual loving recognition.

Rights

While the love relationship regulates recognitive encounters in one's immediate sphere (i.e. family and friends), it is necessarily impossible that we can establish such
intimate bonds with society at large. Thus, a different set of recognitive relationships must be in place in order for our subjectivity to develop and flourish outside of the limited sphere of influence or love relationships. Honneth argues that the next step involve legal recognition; the development of rights. He explains that “we can only come to understand ourselves as the bearers of rights when we know, in turn, what various normative obligations we must keep vis-à-vis others: only once we have taken the perspective of the 'generalized other', which teaches us to recognize the other members of the community as the bearers of rights, can we also understand ourselves to be legal persons” (SR, 108). The basis of Honneth's argument here, which has been illustrated through many concrete struggles (ex: the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement, or even extending voting rights to non-landing owning men), is that one can only fully function as an agent, fully see her or himself as a subject worthy of respect, if he or she knows that they have an avenue by which their claims can be addressed.

This avenue is the legal sphere. Unfortunately, a lack of legal recognition can function to explain this argument somewhat better than the granting of recognition. For example, it was difficult, if not impossible, for women in the 19th century to see themselves as full agents deserving of equal treatment as men because they were not seen as such by the society at large and, practically speaking, their agency was severely limited (both socially and legally). Their sphere of influence was relegated almost exclusively to the home. It was only through a struggle for equal rights, which is still being fought today (unequal pay, the glass ceiling, etc.), that women gained recognition as autonomous agents. One can only take the position of the “generalized other,” of the legal person, if and only if the other does the same thing simultaneously. This is
impossible if the other cannot voice her rights claims because there simply is no place to do so or, to put it somewhat differently, it is not possible to see oneself as a legal person if one is invisible to the legal system. Thus, there must be a way in which one can be elevated to the point of gaining equal recognition, at which point the perception of oneself as well as the other's perception, of you, begins to change (albeit quite slowly sometimes).

According to Honneth, what has happened historically is a gradual expansion of the sphere of rights beginning around the 18th century (SR, 115). He tells us that

Within legal studies, it has meanwhile become a matter of course to divide individual rights into civil rights guaranteeing liberty, political rights guaranteeing participation, and social rights guaranteeing basic welfare. The first category refers to negative rights that protect a person’s life, liberty, and property from unauthorized state interference; the second category refers to the positive rights guaranteeing a person the opportunity to participate in the processes of public will-formation; and the third category, finally, refers to the similarly positive rights that ensure a person’s fair share in the distribution of basic goods (SR, 115).

The continuous argument for the expansion of rights in such a manner relies on the fact that people have understood that truly having any one of these rights is contingent upon having all of them (SR, 117). For example, if we want people to have freedom or liberty (a civil right), but only grant educational opportunities to those who can afford them (a social right), then we have in fact undermined the freedom of the poor. Without a proper education people cannot even begin to extend their sphere of influence and the quality of
their life. If we take this a step back, we can also say that one’s initial right to noninterference from governmental intrusion is made quite ineffective if one cannot participate in the governmental process through voting. Hence a system that guarantees civil rights without allowing people to participate in the political process through means of a vote, as it would be the case if a state restricted voting only to those who own land or have other wealth, would be in fact be rendered moot because the landowners would create laws that act largely to their benefit (as history has repeatedly shown). This means that the civil rights of nonvoters would end up trampled more often than not. Thus, it turns out that the civil rights of noninterference are contingent upon the ability to participate in the political process, and this in turn contingent upon having the material means (i.e. access to basic goods necessary for survival and a decent education) to make properly informed decisions.

Furthermore, Honneth points out that universal rights are essentially an all or nothing sort of concept. That is, either everyone has them equally or no one truly has them (SR, 119). The basic reason for this, according to Honneth, is because their universal nature inextricably ties them together with the notion of self-respect; that is, self-respect for all is impossible without a notion of right and we all ought to be respected in light of our humanity. He writes:

Just as, in the case of love, children acquire, via the continuous experience of 'maternal' care, the basic self-confidence to assert their needs in an unforced manner, adult subjects acquire, via the experience at the legal recognition, the possibility of seeing their actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy (SR, 118).
The basic argument that Honneth has in mind here is that I cannot learn to respect myself as a person out in the world if this respect is not reflected back to me by others. Recognition must be *reciprocal*. If the other is denying my basic humanity, which is effectively what happens when one's basic right are denied, at least *part* of this denial is internalized, forcing me to question whether I am worthy of respect (I say *part* because one can still gain some level of recognition from within one's own marginalized group).

If we live in a world where some have rights and some don’t, then some get recognition and some don’t. When we ask ourselves why some ought to have rights and some are denied these same rights, then there must be argument made for exclusivity. All such arguments end up making arbitrary distinctions among humans based either on race, ethnicity, gender, or so forth. What this in fact means is that when I deny someone’s right to vote, for example, I deny them recognition as full, autonomous person. I tell them that they do not have what it takes to participate in the political process. Because I do not recognize them they in turn *cannot* recognize me because we are now on unequal footing and I cannot accept their recognition, which jeopardizes my rights and my autonomy because the Other will end up viewing rights as something to be forcefully taken. This will of course undermine autonomy *for everyone*. Thus, we either universalize rights allowing all to respect themselves as agents in front of a legal system or we undermine them by arbitrarily allowing only some people to have them.

**Social Esteem**

While I am basically in agreement with what Honneth says concerning the need
and nature of recognition in the love and legal relationships,\(^6\) I substantially part ways with what he has to say concerning social esteem. It is at this point that I must criticize his anti-metaphysical outlook and his “formal” conception of ethical life. What I begin to criticize here is what I will continue to criticize and expand upon in chapters three and four. I will argue that a “formal” conception of ethical life is really no conception at all because it robs the ethical life of any substance whatsoever, forcing us back into a purely liberal position about the status of the subject, which is precisely that which recognition has sought to avoid.

The liberal conception of the individual, which is found in the tradition spanning from Hobbes and Locke and moving all the way to thinkers such as Rawls and Dworkin, is that the individual is the ultimate building block of society. This individual is a being who has rational choice is the basic ontological unit of the political. This stands in stark contrast to the ancient tradition, which saw society or the community as the basic ontological unit of the political, and the individual can be understood as such only with reference to the social. That is, there are no human beings outside of society. What recognitive theory ultimately argues, even what Honneth himself argues, is basically in line with the ancient conception of political ontology – subjectivity, rationality, and cognition are contingent upon intersubjectivity and recognition. That is, one must begin with the social and work back to the individual instead of the other way around. As it was mentioned in the end of the “Love” section above, Honneth explicitly articulates this in *Reification and Recognition* when he tells us that cognition is fundamentally contingent

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\(^6\) I say basically in agreement because I think that he overstates the case for the connection between rights and autonomy. He makes the very Western assumption that autonomy in the way he describes it is a good in and of itself. However, I do not think that this undermines the basic argument that without legal recognition one’s very status as a human being is undermined.
upon recognition.

The fallout from the liberal conception of the individual is that the individual can only be considered to be free and to exhibit full agency when there are no “external” impositions from the outside. Whatever identity, be it black, homosexual, classical music fan, stamp collector, or whatever, the individual chooses is perfectly fine as long as it is not forces upon you by others. In his essay “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction,” K. Anthony Appiah calls these various sorts of identities “scripts” that are provided by different collectives, and he thinks that individuals can basically pick and choose which scripts they take up (Appiah, 160-61). If a script is detrimental to my identity, then I can pick a different one or reformulate the one I have. I believe that this conception of identity is seriously flawed. It assumes that there is some sort of static thing that the individual is prior to the acquisition of an identity, which seems to fundamentally misunderstand how powerfully we are shaped by society at all levels.

Strangely enough (or perhaps not so strangely given the Kantian influences on critical theory that have been incorporated by Habermas), Honneth basically ends up arguing along very similar lines in *The Struggle for Recognition*. His conception of social esteem, unlike the more substantial conception of ethical life found in Hegel that owes much to the ancient tradition, is that we esteem each other based on the concrete *work* that we do. “Unlike modern legal recognition, social esteem is directed... at the particular qualities that characterize people in their personal difference” (*SR*, 122; emphasis mine). For example, I recognize that the work a doctor or engineer does, and furthermore, *this particular doctor or engineer*, is useful to society and worthy of recognition, and they do
the same for me. Honneth tells us that “persons can feel themselves to be ‘valuable’ only when they know themselves to be recognized for accomplishments that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others” (SR, 125).

There are at least two substantial difficulties that are inherent in this position. First of all, given the hierarchical organization of contemporary capitalist society along with its problem of racism, sexism and classism, misrecognition runs rampant with this conception of social esteem. To put it bluntly, we just don't really recognize the work of janitors, restaurant workers, care workers, etc., in the same way that we recognize the work of doctors, lawyers or engineers (to name a few). Labor divisions still lay along lines of race, class and sex, so we end up misrecognizing and denying the worth of workers in the industries. Furthermore, it seems to me that it simply isn't the case that all individual accomplishments are really worthy of recognition in the way Honneth writes. There are a couple of basic examples at the extreme ends of the employment spectrum that illustrate this point. First of all, given the economic and social realities of the 21st century, there is no way that I can recognize the work that a fast food worker performs in the same way that I can recognize the work of a doctor or a mechanic. What this means is that there is a substantial chunk of the population that is necessarily forced into the service industry because of contemporary capitalism that will never get recognition in the way that Honneth envisions.

At the other end of the spectrum it is difficult for me, but perhaps not for many people, to recognize the work of a CEO who makes millions by downsizing companies and firing workers in order to make a company “more efficient,” while at the same time effectively destroying whole communities. I'm sure that it is likewise difficult for the
same CEO to recognize the work and accomplishments of a philosopher such as myself. From his or her standpoint, the work that I do in political theory goes contrary to the heart of his or her general beliefs; that is, that free and open commerce is that which is best for human beings as a whole and this sometimes calls for sacrifices. He or she would see what I do as fundamentally disruptive to the general social order (which is what I repeatedly question). Thus, there is misrecognition embedded among all points of the spectrum in a capitalist economic system.

I should make note that Honneth is well aware that contemporary labor divisions do in fact lead to the dilemma I outline above. He argues, and I wholeheartedly agree, that different labor conditions are necessary to overcome this grave difficulty. However, and this is where we substantially part way, I think that he makes a devastating mistake by arguing that one must stick to a 'formal' conception of the good and an individualistic conception of social esteem entirely defined by my accomplishments and my conception of the good life, whatever that may be. This brings us to the second and much more substantial objection.

Because recognitive theory leads us directly away from the atomistic social ontology which liberalism endorses, a point that Honneth himself repeatedly makes, it seems to me that the only thing that recognition has in common with liberalism is its valuing of rights. If we have a notion that individuals are contingent upon society, making the social both genetically and ontologically prior to the agent, which we must have if we take recognition seriously, then formal conceptions of the good life fall to the wayside in the same way that liberalism falls to the wayside.

Instead, what we must have is a relatively thick conception of the good life. What

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7 For example, see “Work and Recognition: A Redefinition.”
this in fact entails is that we take up notions of the good along with notions of the right (thus recognition ends up being the combination of both liberalism and communitarianism). Notions of the good life tend to be tied to the values of concrete communities, but they ought to be further tied to some virtue framework, since all virtue ethics ultimately aim at the good. Although virtue has only resurfaced in ethical discourse of the past half-century, having been largely abandoned in favor of consequentialism and deontology, it is nonetheless at the heart of a large number of traditions. In the west, it is found in the work of Aristotle, Plato, and Aquinas most famously, giving us the ability to draw on either a more secularized notion of virtue (Aristotle) or a more religious one (Aquinas). This, I believe, will be contingent upon the decision of some concrete community. Likewise, in the east, virtue is present in Buddhism, Taoism, and, to perhaps the greatest extent, Confucianism.

Therefore, I propose that there be socially and historically contingent manifestations of what virtue means depending on the social and historical context of different communities, but *some* notion of the good and human flourishing will the regulating mechanism for social esteem (what Hegel calls 'Ethical Life'). This means that recognition at this level will not be solely based on one's individual accomplishments, although those will certainly be important, but rather on how virtuous a person's character is and how far this carries over into taking up the good of the community as a whole. This avoids the problem of formalism and contemporary misrecognition due to advanced capitalism. What I find promising in the various virtue frameworks is that they all have notions of the good and flourishing at heart, providing universality to the combination of virtue and recognition theory, yet they also manifest the particular virtues
and how they are cultivated differently depending on shifting socio-historical circumstances.8

Ontology

Honneth is extremely clear and quite adamant that ontology no longer plays any role in critical theory; that it must be abandoned in light of discoveries in the empirical sciences. With this claim he is on board with the general thrust of critical theory, especially as it is found in the work of Jürgen Habermas. In a diverse set of essays, including “Philosophy as Stand-In Interpreter” and “Postmetaphysical Thinking,” Habermas repeatedly argues that the traditional philosophical project of grand theorizing—attempting to explain reality as a whole based on metaphysical principles—has been a failure. Following Adorno and Horkheimer's arguments in Dialectic of Enlightenment, Habermas argues that western rationality has done exactly the opposite of what it has promised. Instead of producing universal truth, it has instead made reason entirely procedural (Habermas, CA 3-4). Reason has been used simply for means-end analysis, which is actually inevitable given the enlightenment views of the instrumentality of nature. Given the failure of the traditional enlightenment project, we as philosophers can no longer claim to be at the head of the sciences, leaving philosophy to be a “stand-in-interpreter.”

Habermas elaborates on this notion of a “stand-in interpreter” writing: “whose seat would philosophy be keeping; what would it be standing in for? Empirical theories

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8 Unfortunately, I lack the proper space here to work out the substantive connections between recognition theory and virtue. Given the fact that Hegel’s entire philosophy is heavily indebted to Aristotle, this would be a separate lengthy study of its own. Therefore, I intend to carry out the connection between recognition theory and virtue in such a separate study, focusing on both Aristotle and the Confucian tradition.
with strong universalist claims” (CA, 15). Honneth simply takes this position over and for
granted, and while I am deeply sympathetic to Honneth’s recognitive project, I believe
that it is problematic to simply accept that this is all that philosophy can accomplish and
that this claim entails that the metaphysics as a whole is dead enterprise. Honneth’s
project takes various empirical theories from psychoanalysis, sociology, and so forth, and
synthesizes them into a philosophical position. His dismissal of metaphysical positions
runs throughout his work. Thus, early on in the introduction for The Fragmented World of
the Social, he writes: “In order, though, while undertaking a reconstruction of Hegel's
philosophy, to avoid falling into the danger of unwittingly incorporating his metaphysical
premises, I have more or less at the same time undertaken the project of subjecting to
independent critical examination of the few post-Hegelian, and thus “materialistic,”
outlines for a struggle for recognition” (FWS, XV). We see that he believes here that the
metaphysical premises of the Hegelian project are unacceptable, although he articulates
no argument for why this is the case because he simply takes the position of critical
theory for granted.

He rearticulates this position once again in the Struggle for Recognition, telling us
that:

But with the advent of the intellectual movement that set out to dismantle
the theoretical presuppositions of German Idealism in order to advance to
an empirically grounded, detranscendentalized concept of reason, this
metaphysical backing for Hegel's philosophy became dated, and in losing
the foundation for the Idealist concept of Spirit, it also lost the privilege
that had previously sheltered it from being tested against empirical reality
With that basic statement, and the presupposition that the arguments leveled against Hegel by thinkers such as Marx, Feuerbach and Kierkegaard decisively undermine Hegelian metaphysics, Honneth looks to avoid the “mistake” of falling back into metaphysics. He then looks to ground his whole theory in empirical research.¹

As we see above, Honneth’s criticisms of Hegelian metaphysics, and metaphysics in general, rests on a strong distinction between metaphysics on the one hand, and empirical science on the other. As he argues above, reason must be “empirically grounded” and “detranscendentalized”, which speaks against Hegel, Kant, and the transcendental phenomenological tradition. Given the advancements made in science and philosophy after the early 19th century, “the metaphysical backing for Hegel’s philosophy became dated, and in losing the foundation for the Idealist concept of spirit, it also lost the privilege that had previously sheltered it from being tested against empirical reality” (Honneth, SR, 68). Since Honneth does not directly engage the “Idealist concept of spirit,” what we can take from such a statement, and from his general method of argumentation, is that the concept of reason he is working is an empirically grounded one – the only claims that can justified rationally are those that can be studied by the empirical sciences, and the notion of spirit is beyond any such justification. This position makes the further claim that any inquiries into metaphysical questions lie beyond the bounds of empirical science, and thus have no possibility of being validated.

Before I address the charges that Hegel is simply a metaphysician of spirit and that his claims regarding spirit have no possible way of being empirically tested and

¹ Although he admits that there is no way to ground normative rights claims through empirical studies (SR, 110). This point needs to further examined in a separate study.
verified, I must first outline what I think it means to be a metaphysician, how this is somewhat different from what Honneth and Habermas envision, and why Hegel does not succumb to the charges that Honneth levels against him. Furthermore, I would also like to point out that it is only in Hegel’s “metaphysical” works that we get the most clearly and strongly articulated view of recognition, and that it is precisely this view that can help us to develop the theory to its fullest capacity. As such, my aim is not to undermine Honneth’s views but rather to bolster them by working through the later thought of Hegel, which will add metaphysical, a priori justifications to Honneth’s empirically grounded arguments.

Let me begin by stating that I do not think that a real distinction can be made between metaphysics and ontology. Both are philosophical enterprises that look to uncover the underlying principles and nature of reality. I prefer the term “ontology” over “metaphysics” here for mostly practical and rhetorical reasons that I will clarify after I put forth some preliminary remarks on the nature of metaphysics. Thus, the terms will be used interchangeably in the discussion below. The very definition and practice of what it means to do metaphysics varies depending on the philosophical era and general standpoint one occupies, but there are certain conceptual overlaps across the various philosophical traditions. Contemporary analytic metaphysician Michael J. Loux gives this as a preliminary definition of metaphysics: “metaphysics considers things as beings or existents and attempts to specify the properties or features they exhibit just insofar as they are beings” (MCI, 3). That is, metaphysics strips particular things or objects in the world of all the properties that make them concretely what they are in order to concentrate on their existence or being as such. Furthermore, it does so by taking these things outside of
their socio-historical context, treating them as fixed or eternal. To borrow from the Aristotelian axiom, the task of metaphysics as first philosophy is to study “being qua being.” I will be using this general definition as a guidepost for the rest of the discussion here.

Loux argues that metaphysical disagreements are primarily grounded between traditionally minded realism, such as that of Aristotle and many of the medieval thinkers, and what he calls “anti-realism.” Loux attributes the anti-realist position to thinkers who follow Kant. The basic tenet of realist metaphysics is that there is a mind-independent reality, and that the task of metaphysics is to uncover what this mind-independent reality is really like. Loux tells us that traditional realist metaphysicians “will insist that the very idea of thinking about or referring to things presupposes that there are relations that tie our thoughts and words to the mind-independent, language-independent things we think and talk about” (MCI, 9). What this entails is that there is something outside of the mind existing in-itself that the mind can access and meaningfully talk about, that this something does not depend in any way on human perception or subjectivity, and that this something can be known by us. To borrow from the Kantian language, we as human beings can in fact know what things are like in-themselves. This knowledge is not clouded, distorted, or in any way changed by the subjective categories we employ to describe objects and by the language we use to talk about them. Rather, there is a direct correspondence between objects and our subjective categories (Loux, MCI, 261). The anti-realist position simply states that we can never transcend the subjective categories we use to describe the world, thus barring knowledge into things as they are in-themselves. The task for the anti-realist is to uncover and describe the subjective
categories and “conceptual structures” that are in play when we talk about the world (Loux, *MCI*, 259). As such, Hegel would be classified as an “anti-realist”, although I prefer to simply use the term “idealism” to describe his position.

For the Aristotelian tradition that Loux is defending, metaphysics is an enterprise which seeks to discover the nature of *substances*. Substances are nothing strange or supernatural – in fact, they are simply individual things in the world; things such as people or horses. The rationalist tradition of the modern period goes in a much different direction when it rejects Aristotelianism and its medieval proponents. There is still talk of substances, but they are greatly reduced in number, and many of the thinkers will fall on different sides of the realism/anti-realism divide. While each individual (at least living individuals) counts as a substance for Aristotle, Descartes will argue that there are really only two substances: mind and matter. Spinoza argues that there is only one substance, God, and that mind and matter are simply properties of the one substance. Leibniz will later argue that only the ideal monads are substances. Furthermore, the continental rationalist tradition will greatly expand the scope of what metaphysics can and should do. In the later rationalists such as Christian Wolff, as well as in much of the medieval tradition, metaphysics is meant to be able to demonstrate the nature and immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and prove the nature and existence of free will. Thus, while the task of Aristotelian metaphysics, and the metaphysics that Loux defends, is to understand the nature of transcendent entities (that is, entities that are outside the human mind) that are experienced by human beings, the tasks of the later metaphysics was to prove the nature of existence of entities that transcend any possible human experience (although many religious thinkers will argue that God does not in fact transcend human
experience). As such, the rationalist metaphysical tradition is much bolder in the claims that it will make about what metaphysics can and should do.

It is the rationalist metaphysics of the modern tradition that are the primary target for Kant’s critical attack, but in attacking the rationalist metaphysics Kant also ends up calling into questions the basic tenets of Aristotelian realism. Kant tells us that metaphysics is “a whole isolated speculative cognition of reason that elevates itself entirely above all instruction from experience…In it reason continuously gets stuck, even when it claims a priori insight (as it pretends) in those laws confirmed by commonest experience” (CPR, 109; B xiv). In its attempt to uncover the a priori (necessary and universal) nature of reality, metaphysics goes beyond what reason can actually do. Metaphysics leaves the realm of experience and loses its footing in endless speculation about the ultimate nature of reality; a reality that in principle transcends all possible experience. For example, we have no possible empirical intuitions about the nature of human freedom. These are found nowhere in experience. In his book Hegel, Frederick Beiser tells us that this Kantian conception of metaphysics sees metaphysical inquiry as an attempt to gain insight into that which is “unconditioned.” Beiser tells us that “Kant understands the unconditioned as whatever completes the series of conditions: the final cause, the last unit of analysis, the ultimate subject of predication. He explains that there are three fundamental ideas of metaphysics corresponding to three basic concepts of the unconditioned: God, freedom and immortality” (H, 54). If metaphysics (or ontology) is the task of knowing the unconditioned, then it necessarily transcends all human experience because human experience can in principle never perceive the unconditioned. It only perceives various conditioned causes and effects in the world.
It is for this reason that Kant wants to provide a much humbler task for philosophy. He continues to use the term “metaphysics” but does so in a different sense from his predecessors. Philosophy is used as a method of justification of our *objective experience*, but it cannot be used to justify or understand what *object are like in-themselves*. Kant tells us that there must be objects in and of-themselves because objects appear to consciousness (*phenomena*), but what these objects are truly like (as *noumena*) is unknowable. What we can and do know is what the appearances of those objects are necessarily like and the *categories* which make those appearances possible. The categories are transcendental – they are the conditions for the possibility of experience, but they are not found in experience itself. Rather, they must be in place in order to make experience possible, making them necessary and universal as well.

It is not this claim of Kant’s that is of interest to us here however – it is rather the Kantian critique of metaphysics that is important. If we take it as a given that Kant is correct and that we cannot have knowledge of things as they are in-themselves, then the traditional project of metaphysics is a bankrupt enterprise. We cannot know substance either in the Aristotelian or in the Leibnizian/Spinozist sense. All that we can have knowledge of is empirical experience and that which makes it possible, making science the gold standard for truth. Honneth understands Hegel to be a metaphysician very much in the traditional sense of the term, concerned with understanding the nature of the substance known as spirit or *Geist*. This is the traditional reading of Hegel that was popularized with the decline of Hegelian philosophy in the mid-19th century and the advent of analytic philosophy in the English-speaking countries.
I believe that this reading of Hegel as a pre-critical, traditional metaphysician – the reading on which Honneth’s claim that his own project is anti-metaphysical is based – is flawed in many ways that I will elaborate upon below. It presents us with what is essentially a false dichotomy on how we ought to treat Hegel: either Hegel is a traditional metaphysician, and thus obsolete in an era where empirical studies guide our knowledge, or we must purposefully purge all metaphysical claims out of Hegel to make his thought viable (which is what Honneth does). Because of these negative associations of metaphysics as a historical curiosity after the critical turn, I choose here to instead use the term “ontology”. I will do this partly for simple rhetorical reasons, and partly because I believe that ontology as the study of being, along with being’s correlates essence, becoming, quality, and so forth, describes Hegel’s thought slightly better than the term “metaphysics.” Also, as Beiser points out, Hegel cannot be accused of developing a pre-critical ontology or metaphysics because pre-critical metaphysics is a science of transcendent entities or beings. Hegel’s ontology, on the other hand, is “a science of the immanent” (H, 55). To say that something is immanent means that all sharp metaphysical dualisms are abandoned. This would include the dualisms between mind and body, God and the world, the finite and the infinite, and so forth. Everything that exists does so along the same continuum, making Hegelian thought a variety of monism. Thus, as a “science of the immanent,” Hegelian ontology will not attempt to gain knowledge or entities that are outside the scope of human experience.

What is it that I mean by ontology, then? In general, I understand ontology to be a study of the a priori structure of being and the various categories we employ in understanding its nature (i.e. essence, universality, particularity, quality, quantity, and so
However, what this means is much different after the critical turn. After the critical turn we must take into account the fact that the nature of being can be understood only in light of it being filtered through our subjective categories, and that there is no possibility of ignoring the subjective element in our study of ontology. These subjective categories have their objective correlates, but this notion differs from what Loux has in mind because for him being has a subject and mind-independent nature. Furthermore, I believe that ontology can no longer be conceived as the speculative, armchair enterprise that it was for the pre-critical tradition. Rather, it is directly informed by various studies and findings in the natural and social sciences, as well as history. It is a continuous and in principle unfinishable effort to find universal and necessary structures of being in light of philosophical reflection and various findings in empirical research. As such, I believe that the search for universality goes hand in hand with empirical research, since this too is a continuous effort to discover various truths about the nature of observable reality, and this too is in principle an ever-developing project.

In order to work through the notion described above, we must work through some of its implications. In his book *Starting with Hegel*, Craig Matarrese points out that Hegelian metaphysics/ontology is notoriously difficult to classify because it departs from traditional definitions and practices of the discipline. He tells us that Hegel’s “view defies easy classification… because although he is surely committed to a metaphysics of some sort, it is not the familiar and historically entrenched metaphysics of substance, but rather what we might call the ‘metaphysics of structure’” ([*SWH*, 81]). This ‘metaphysics of structure’ is described by Matarrese in light of Hegel’s philosophy of nature (which is quite possibly the most ignored aspect of his corpus), which demonstrates how Hegel
draws out the essential structures of nature out of the sciences that were available to him.

According to Matarrese, various studies into contemporary evolutionary theory have revealed that organisms that are unrelated to each other due to geographic distance and isolation have ended up developing remarkably similar characteristics due to life in comparable environments. This is referred to as “convergent evolution” (*SWH*, 79).

According to this concept, it was necessary for these organisms to develop in this manner in order for them to survive. Matarrese writes:

There will always be complexities in sorting out which forms of necessity are mathematical, logical, or physical, and which can ultimately be traced back to contingent historical conditions that could be this way or that, and that sometimes foreclose design options in the future. But careful study into convergent evolution allows us to assemble an account of nature that teases necessity away from contingency by identifying the basic organizing principles of nature, and thereby revealing *a priori* structure.

And once we are doing this, we are squarely engaged in exactly what Hegel took himself to be doing in his philosophy of nature, namely, trying to reconstruct the basic organizing principles of nature, which are only incompletely revealed in observable events (*SWH*, 80).

This analogy to evolution and Hegel’s philosophy of nature is a way of demonstrating a basic point about Hegelian ontology, and the kind of ontology I would endorse in general. As Matarrese points out, Hegelian ontology never proceeds in a completely abstract, solely *a priori* manner that is typical of traditional metaphysical thought. Rather, it proceeds in “weakly *a priori*” manner. It looks to discover the necessary and universal
structures of being out of observations about the world and out of empirical data \((SWH, 90)\). Instead of being a traditional metaphysical project which pays no attention to empirical sciences or history, Hegelian ontology is fact steeped in both. Matarrese tells us that, “Hegel is interested in the rationality or structure of nature, as it is reconstructed from layers of contingency” \((SWH, 93)\). Thus, Hegelian thought is not an abstract speculation in the nature of spirit as a substance, as Honneth would have it, but rather a concrete investigation into the basic structures of being which takes into account findings in the empirical sciences.

Much of Hegel’s metaphysics or ontology takes up traditional metaphysical questions only to show how they have been misconstrued. We can see how he does this by looking at the problem of universals. The debate over the nature of universals from a traditional standpoint boils down a disagreement between realism and nominalism. As Loux points out, the debate between realism and nominalism can be understood in light of one’s ontological commitments \((MCI, 19)\). The realist takes the position that there are two sorts of things in world: particulars and universals. Particulars are simply individual things that exist in the world; things such as a table, cup, person, and so forth, and these things can only occupy one point of space at any given time (Loux says that they are non-repeatable). “Universals, by contrast, are construed as repeatable entities. At any given time, numerically one and the same universal can be wholly and completely exhibited or, as realists typically put it, exemplified by several different spatially discontinuous particulars” \((Loux, MCI, 19)\). What this means is that both the universal and the particular are mind-independent entities, and the particular is described and understood in light of the universal. Nominalism is the position which states that the similarity between
entities is a matter of linguistic convention, making the universal a convenient label for certain things which have similar qualities. Under this position one is only committed to the existence of particulars. In this tradition Aristotle has been read both as both a nominalist and a realist, but it seems to me that nominalism describes his position slightly more accurately. Aristotle says that a substance, that which has ontological primacy in his thought, is just the individual thing (this man, this horse, as he puts it). Aquinas, on the other hand, argues that all existing entities are not only a composite of form and matter, as Aristotle does, but they also must have being and essence. The form is the quite literal shape of the thing, and the essence is the universal that makes the form what it is. He is thus a realist regarding universals since they are actually existing entities.

Hegel’s position on this topic rethinks the question itself. Since he ultimately collapses the distinction between the subject and object, he completely bypasses the debate between realism and nominalism. When the strict distinction between subject and object is collapsed, one must account for the subjective categories that describe objects in order to truly understand objects, and since the objective in turn informs the subjective, it is nonsensical to even ask the question of whether universals are independently existing entities or simply exist in the mind. Furthermore, and more importantly for our discussion here, Hegel challenges what the very notion of a universal is and how it describes various beings. Rather than thinking of it as a fixed and static entity as the realist conceives it to be, Hegel instead thinks of a universal as being historically informed and dynamic. For example, the universal “human” is embedded in socio-historical circumstances. I cannot understand what it means to be a human without taking into account what human being I am talking about. Where did this human being come from? What language does he or she
speak? What history has shaped his or her background? Is this human a man or a woman? All of these questions are irrelevant in the traditional debate surrounding universals but essential here. The very universal itself must include all kinds of particular information, making the very question “what is a universal?” variable depending on historical circumstances. However, it must also be added that once one peels away all the layers of contingency and accounts for them, there emerge certain features about humanity that are universal in the more conventional sense of the term. For example, the notions of subjectivity, freedom, and rights would necessarily apply to all human beings, but how they concretely manifest will depend upon one’s circumstances.

This kind of ontology is a bit at odds with what has been traditionally understood by the term because it does not view being, and the various concepts used to describe being (essence, universality, quantity, and so forth) as a study of fixed categories that must simply be made clear to the human mind. This ontology is historically and empirically informed, but it can still be classified as ontology because it proceeds in an a priori manner, attempting to discover the necessary and universal principles out of empirical contingency. Given the fact that Hegel only had access to science as it had developed in the early 19th century, some of the conclusions he draws regarding nature, the human mind, and society will end up being antiquated and wrong. (This is not truly problematic since one of the foundational theoretical points that Hegel makes is that we are all children of our time, so even he would disagree with some of his conclusions if he was alive today). However, Hegel is not wrong about these things because he is an abstract metaphysician of spirit, as Honneth would have it. The opposite is in fact true – he is a metaphysician who takes empirical work into account. However, he does not stop
at the empirical as Honneth would like to do. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that
“spirit” is not an abstract substance for Hegel. It refers to the human mind and the
institutions that humanity creates (subjective and objective spirit, respectively). Matarrese
points out that, “there is nothing non-natural about ‘spirit,’ it is rather like an emergent
property of nature that appears when the right sort of structure and complexity is in
place” (SWH, 94). As we will see throughout here, the way that spirit develops on both
the subjective and objective level is through the recognition. It is the process through
which subjectivity comes to self-realization, and we finally get an understanding of what
it means to be human (the essence of humanity).

Overall, I believe that recognition must in fact have an ontological or
metaphysical foundation of the kind that I describe and endorse here in order for it to do
the work that we need it to do. When we state that the very process of child development,
the granting of rights, and our understanding of who we are as human beings is
contingent upon the process of recognition, we are making a very strong claim. What we
are in fact stating is that there cannot be such things as human beings or subjects without
recognition; that there cannot be subjectivity as such without recognition. In Reification
and Recognition, Honneth repeatedly states that cognition is dependent upon and comes
only after recognition. As such, recognition is both temporally and logically prior to
cognition. Honneth can deny it as much as he'd like, but this kind of claim is
fundamentally ontological in nature in my understanding of the term. We are speaking of
the necessary structures of reality, and whenever we speak of necessary structures of
reality we depart the realm of the empirical and must speak in ontological or
metaphysical terms, even while the empirical research is informing these structures. My
aim in the rest of the dissertation is to show that not only is ontology not a problem, but that in fact it is at the heart of the recognitive paradigm. It allows us to avoid the most potent criticisms of the theory which would reduce recognition to various disputes over the empirical nature of identity (I have Patchen Markell, Kelly Oliver, and Lois McNay in mind here).

Conclusion

Overall, in this chapter I have provided the basic arguments behind recognitive theory as they are found in the work of its most famous contemporary proponent: Axel Honneth. I then criticized his conception if the “formal” aspect of ethical life, arguing that it goes against the basic starting points of recognition, which take us out of the formal and place us into the substantial. Finally, I have begun outlining the basic insight behind my work here: one must have ontology in order to properly ground recognition, and the ontological framework that I will be working with is the one that is found in the works of the later Hegel.
Chapter 2:

Politicizing the Transcendental Subject: Fichte’s Theory of Recognition

Introduction

It is fairly safe to say that J.G. Fichte is the first philosopher to explicitly formulate a theory of recognition. He does so in his work *Foundations of Natural Right*, a portion of his ever-developing philosophical project the *Wissenschaftslehre* (usually translated into English as “the science of knowing,” but often simply left in the German by translators). It is also fairly safe to say that interpreting Fichte’s overall project is a bit of a nightmare. Fichte wrote *fifteen* entirely different versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, each of them containing its own set of terminology and a new formulation of the starting point of the science. Furthermore, having been accused of Atheism in the late 1700’s, Fichte begins to bring the Absolute (God) into his system after 1800. Thus, what he writes *after* 1800 is largely considered to be fundamentally different from what he had written in the 1700’s, where he was very much working within the parameters of transcendental philosophy as it is formulated by Kant.

Given the varieties of presentation, and given my own focus on recognitive theory, I have chosen to limit my exegesis and criticism of Fichte to the relative early Jena presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. These include the original presentation of 1794, translated into English as *The Science of Knowledge* (I will henceforth refer to this as the 1794 SK for the sake of brevity); An introductory essay titled “Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre,*” where Fichte philosophizes about transcendental
philosophy itself; his attempt at a *New Presentation of the Wissencattshlehre*, written in 1797/8; and most importantly for my project, *The Foundations of Natural Right*, written in 1795/6. The first three lay down the general contours of Fichte’s philosophy, without which we cannot begin to understand how and why he articulates a theory of recognition, and the *Foundations of Natural Rights* presents the theory itself.

The reason for including a chapter on Fichte’s recognitive theory is basically twofold. First of all, I do not think we can get a complete account of recognition as ontology of the political subject without seeing how Fichte develops this notion of transcendental grounds. Secondly, and I believe more importantly, a theory of recognition based on transcendental grounds will provide us with an interesting comparison and a different ontological framework of human subjectivity than the one I will develop by working through Hegel. I am largely critical of the transcendental approach that is developed by Fichte due to it ahistorical nature. Rather than understanding the subject as historically situated and shaped by one’s culture, language, customs, and so forth, it understands the subject in purely *formal* terms. I find this notion of a formal subject politically problematic because it washes over important *differences* that have led to various power inequalities among different peoples. Ultimately, I argue that a transcendental theory of intersubjectivity will lead us to a liberal conception of the subject, which is what Fichte’s political philosophy does, and I find this to be deeply problematic. As I began to argue in chapter one, recognition *necessarily* moves us away from liberalism by prioritizing the communal and social.

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10 It would be interesting but well outside the scope of this chapter to compare his account with Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity, since they are both working in a transcendental idealist framework (broadly construed).
The overall framework for this chapter will be to begin by explaining the roots and starting points of Fichte’s philosophical method and project: the grounding of transcendental idealism in the activity of the ‘I.’ I then move on to show how the grounding of the I or ego is incomplete without a reference to multiple subjects; that is, I will explain Fichte’s recognitive project. Finally, I will criticize his presuppositions based on the arguments outlined above. This will serve as a key step to developing my own reformulation of the ontology of the subject based on a Hegelian notion of recognition.

The General Project of the *Wissenschaftslehre*

As was mentioned in the introduction, there are fifteen versions of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* (henceforth WL), each with its own set of terminology and method of presentation. Fichte felt justified in radically revising the WL because he was ultimately never quite satisfied with the way it turned out, often being misunderstood and wrongly criticized by the public, and because he makes an Augustinian type of distinction between the “spirit and the letter” (for example see *EPW*, 192). The basic distinction here is that even though the *letter*, that is, the actual presentation of the WL, may have been different with each revision, the *spirit* of his philosophical enterprise is essentially the same. The question to ask ourselves then, is what is the *spirit* of Fichte’s philosophy? Considering the sheer number of presentations, this becomes somewhat murky. However, there are definitely several opening moves that Fichte makes explicit.

First and foremost, Fichte wants to complete the Kantian project. That is, he wants to provide the necessary and universal conditions for knowledge from the standpoint of transcendental subjectivity. Thus, Fichte’s philosophy, unlike those of Schelling
and Hegel, looks to ground all philosophical inquiry from a single, foundational principle: the activity of the transcendental ego. As Günter Zöller points out in his work *Fichte’s Transcendental Philosophy*, “following Kant, Fichte presents the *Wissenschaftslehre* as theory about empirical knowledge, in particular as an account of the non-empirical grounds of experience” (26). The “non-empirical grounds of experience” are to be found in the activity of the transcendental ego.

The most famous presentation of Fichte’s project is found in the 1794 WL (translated into English by Peter Heath and John Lachs as *The Science of Knowing*). This work was hastily compiled by Fichte when he was appointed chair of philosophy in Jena because it was necessary for him to have a textbook for his students which presented his own findings. However, he had no such text ready, so he was writing it as he taught the course, quickly putting together chapter upon chapter on a weekly basis and printing them out for his students. Furthermore, he was explaining unclear passages to students in lecture as he went along; a privilege which the modern reader does not have. Since this is the text that would have been the most widely available to the public at the time, and since this is the text that directly leads to an elaboration of the principles in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, it is essential that Fichte’s opening moves are explained with reference to it (but we must also get help from some of his introductions to his overall project, which are much more clear and explicit about what he is trying to do).

One of the things that Fichte believes is necessary for grounding all philosophy to a single principle is to unify or demolish the distinction that Kant makes between theoretical and practical reason. As Frederick Neuhouser points out in *Fichte’s Theory of Subjectivity*, “Fichte’s attempt to demonstrate the unity of reason takes the form of a
search for a first principle capable of founding a system of philosophy that encompasses both theoretical and practical reason” (21). Since Fichte begins with Kant, he believes the only such possible principle is the activity of the transcendental I. He starts by arguing that if the I is to be truly foundational, if it is to require no further explanation, then it must be essentially free and active. It must be free in order to need no further explanation for itself, because if it were not free, there would have to be something else to explain its activity (another mover that starts the activity, to borrow from Aristotle). It must be considered active for similar reasons. A non-active subjectivity of I is a substance, a reified thing. As we know from two millennia of realist metaphysics, a thing requires an external explanation; a reason for its being. Fichte argues that we get out of this trap if we don’t think of the I as a thing, but simply as activity (I will further explain what this means as we move along).

In his essay “Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre,” where Fichte is philosophizing about what it means to do philosophy itself, he begins with an explanation for the need of a first principle if philosophy is to be raised to the status of a science (Wissenschaftslehre). He writes:

The first principles of our systems should and must be certain in advance. Their certainty cannot be demonstrated within the systems themselves; on the contrary, every proof which is possible within these systems presupposes the certainty of these first principles (EPW, 105).

And
Every possible science has *one first principle*, which cannot be demonstrated within the science itself, but must be certain in advance of the science (*EPW*, 107).

What we see here is Fichte working out a meta-philosophy in order to justify the opening moves of the WL. A coherent science, he argues must have certain and indubitable foundations. The foundations, however, *cannot* themselves be explained within the confines of the science itself because this would then require a further science, leading to an infinite regress and no certain foundations. Thus, the foundations must be presupposed at the *beginning* before we begin to do philosophy as a rigorous science. The foundational principle, according to Fichte, is the free and active I.

One may ask why we should make such a presupposition. Why assume at the very outset that we begin with a subject? Why don’t we begin our philosophy with a study of being as such, as the ancients (and Hegel shortly after Fichte) would have? Fichte’s answer to these questions is given in his *Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*, written in 1797/98. Here he tells us that when we begin to do philosophy the philosopher must start with representations; that which is given to us in experience, and “abstract” from these representations.

If he abstracts from the thing, then he is left with the intellect in itself as the explanatory ground of experience; that is to say, he is left with the intellect in abstraction from its relation to experience. If he abstracts from the intellect, then he is left with the thing in itself (that is, in abstraction from the fact that it occurs within experience) as the explanatory ground of
experience. The first way of proceeding is called idealism; the second is called dogmatism (IW, 11).

What Fichte is arguing here is that there are exhaustively two possibilities for a philosophical system: idealism or realism (what he calls dogmatism). If we consistently follow dogmatism to its logical conclusion we get Spinoza\textsuperscript{11} and if we consistently follow idealism we get Fichtean transcendental idealism. Which of the two should we choose, then? Which one explains reality more accurately?

Fichte makes a fascinating and somewhat unexpected move here. He tells us that “neither of these two systems can directly refute the opposing one; for the dispute between them is a dispute concerning the first principle, i.e., concerning the principle that cannot be derived from any higher principle” (IW, 15). That is, because the two systems have such fundamentally opposite and incompatible starting points or first principles, they cannot ever really talk to each other. They simply talk past one another. The result is that we reach a theoretical impasse. One cannot be said to be better or truer than the other on theoretical grounds. What this ultimately means, according to Fichte, is that the choice is made on practical grounds: “Consequently, the decision between these two systems is one that is determined by free choice; and thus, since even a free decision is supposed to have some basis, it is a decision determined by inclination and interest. What ultimately distinguishes the idealist from the dogmatist is, accordingly, a difference of interest” (IW, 18). Simply put, Fichte’s argument here boils down to the notion, as he elaborates a bit later, that the system that one chooses really depends on what you are interested in

\textsuperscript{11} I mention Spinoza here because he is seen to be the chief proponent of realism in Germany and elsewhere in the late 1700’s. For example, Jacobi, a German theologian and philosopher, argues that when philosophy is taken to its logical conclusions Spinozism necessarily follows.
personally. It depends on the kind of human being that you are or, as Williams points out, it depends one one’s existential commitments (36).

On the surface, this looks to be an arbitrary distinction without a good philosophical argument to back it. It even seems to imply a sort of relativism. What system you choose is up to you. However, the distinction is neither arbitrary nor relativistic. Ultimately, Fichte is arguing that although the impasses between the two systems cannot be theoretically resolved, it can be *practically* resolved. For practical and existential reasons we must presuppose that the I is free and active and that all philosophy begins with the free activity, the “positing” of the transcendental I. As Kant argued in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, if I don’t presuppose my freedom, I have no way to justify ethics (or politics). On similar grounds, Fichte argues the same thing. We have existential concerns which necessitate that we presuppose that the I or subject is free, which also validates his point made in the essay “Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre” that we cannot justify the foundational nature of the transcendental ego from within the system, but must presuppose it. Fichte’s move is much more radical than Kant’s however, because he wants to argue that not only must we presuppose human freedom at the outset of an idealist system, we must in fact presuppose that there is no real distinction between theoretical and practical reason, and furthermore, that it is really practical reason which has primacy in transcendental idealism. As Neuhouser points out, “Fichte comes to believe that his theory of subjectivity can demonstrate the essential unity of reason by showing that the subject’s theoretical and practical faculties are derived from the same fundamental activity of the mind, which he calls ‘self-positing’” (*FTS*, 30).
Since we have in fact been working chronologically backwards from 1798 due to issues of philosophical clarity, we now turn to the 1794 WL. The 1794 WL begins with Fichte arguing that a series of logical steps, assumed as true at the beginning of philosophizing but only proven to be true upon the completion of the WL from the standpoint of transcendental subjectivity, can show how we can ground philosophy in nothing other than the activity of the transcendental ego (SK, 94). He tells us that “the proposition \( A \) is \( A \) (or \( A=\text{A} \), since that is the meaning of the logical copula) is accepted by everyone and that without a moment’s thought: it is admitted to be perfectly certain and established” (SK, 94). This logical truth is then applied to transcendental subjectivity. The \( I \) posits itself freely, resulting in the notion that “\( I=I \)” Connecting the notion of \( I=I \) back to the tautology \( A=A \), Fichte tells us that “\( I \), who posit \( A \) in the predicate position, necessarily know, because the same was posited in the subject position, about my positing of the subject, and hence know myself, again contemplate myself, am the same with myself” (SK, 96; footnote). What Fichte means here is that through its own activity, what he calls “positing,” the subject is immediately self-aware. As is the case for all philosophers who write in the idealist and phenomenological tradition, for Fichte consciousness is necessarily intentional. When the \( I \) or ego begins philosophizing it realizes that it is immediately conscious of its own self, because consciousness is necessarily consciousness of something. We know that the self exists, Fichte argues, because “it has posited itself” (SK, 97-98). This is merely the beginning, however. Through a series of dialectical movements (which Fichte calls thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; a formulation that is often mistakenly attributed to Hegel), Fichte looks to ground all of philosophy and all human knowledge in the positing activity of the \( I \).
The next step in the dialectic from A=A (I=I), which is considered to be the thesis, is to posit the antithesis. The antithesis of pure identity is difference. Thus, the next step is to argue that logic necessitates that if these is an A there must be a not-A. Transferring this logical move to the activity if the I, Fichte argues that if there is an I, there must be a not-I. To explain it in a more phenomenological fashion, subjectivity also requires objectivity; it needs something to be conscious of. (We could also say that subject and object co-constitute each other, even though Fichte would not use such language). However, this is not quite the case at the outset for Fichte. He tells us that at first “I know of ~A that it is opposite of some A. But what that thing may or may not be, of which I know this, can be known to me only on the assumption that I am acquainted with A” (SK, 104). So, at first the knowledge of the necessity of an object in order for there to be a subject is not an acquaintance with actual objects in the world. Rather it is a formal necessity required by an elaboration of transcendental idealist principles. As such, all philosophy, and even objectivity, is initially grounded in the activity of the Ego as I: “Both self and not self are alike products of original acts of the self, and consciousness itself is similarly a product of the self’s first original act, its own positing of itself” (SK, 107). That is, the foundational principle must be the transcendental subject, which lead Schelling and Hegel to later criticize Fichte, perhaps unfairly, that he ultimately falls into mere subjective idealism and solipsism (see for example Schelling’s System of Transcendental Idealism and Hegel’s The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy).

After establishing the principles I=I and I= ~not I, the thesis and the antithesis, Fichte moves on to speak of the synthesis between self and not self, telling us that “in the
first synthetic act, the fundamental synthesis (of self and not self) we have... established a content for all possible future syntheses” (SK, 120). The synthesis shows that there is a higher unity between the self and the not self. The self knows that consciousness exists insofar as it posits itself, but it also knows that it is determined, or shaped by objects. I can only know that I am a subject if there is an object that opposes me. If the not-I is to actually and actively determine or shape the I, then it cannot simply be a mere negation, because, Fichte argues, a mere negation does not have any reality. In order to determine the I, then, the not I must have some sort of concrete reality\textsuperscript{12} (SK, 127-28).

Fichte goes on to re-explain and build upon the basic principles established in the beginning of the 1794 WL for the rest of his life. To say that the presentation there is murky would be a massive understatement. However, according to the very methodology that he introduces, the actual existence of self and not-self becomes problematic from a purely theoretical standpoint because there one must stick to a strictly formal presentation (hence his starting with formal logic). So, as we saw in the explanation in the \textit{Introduction to the WL}, the idealist can never convince the dogmatist of the truth of the starting points if we stick to a strictly formal presentation, because we as humans do not exist as transcendental egos. We exist as living breathing historically situated beings with real life concerns. Ultimately, to “prove” that the only viable option is idealism, we must turn to practical reason. As Williams nicely points out, Fichte’s system is “both transcendental and pragmatic. The ‘first principles’ of the \textit{Wissenschaftslehre} are hypothetical and admit only a pragmatic justification” (43). This pragmatic justification will ultimately be found in Fichte’s practical works. Since my interest here is not strictly

\textsuperscript{12} I leave this final portion underdeveloped simply because Fichte himself is unsure where to go with it. He spends much of the 1794 WL trying to flesh this notion out, but he ultimately abandons it in favor of his practical philosophy because it does not produce the results he needs to make his system stable.
to show how Fichte’s overall system works and what problems may emerge from his starting points, this introduction should suffice to see where he is coming from. We must now turn to our main concern - Fichte’s theory of recognition.

**Fichte’s Theory of Recognition**

After having completed writing and teaching the 1794 WL, Fichte turned to practical philosophy. His next two works are *The Foundations of Natural Right* and the *System of Ethics*. Having finished his argumentation in the 1794 WL with the higher synthesis between I and not-I, Fichte realized that the system would ultimately be solipsistic, and perhaps even worse, be misunderstood as *dogmatic* idealism (like that of Berkeley or Leibniz). Dogmatic idealism for Kant and Fichte is the kind of idealism which performs an ontological reduction of all of reality to the mental rather than the physical. This is precisely *not* the position that Fichte wants to end up in. Initially, his transcendental idealism attempts to avoid any metaphysical commitments, instead starting with epistemology as the primordial philosophical science. (Hence the title *Wissenschaftslehre*: science of knowledge or knowing).

In order to avoid the twin dangers of solipsism and dogmatic idealism, Fichte make his pragmatic turn and tackles what Robert R. Williams repeatedly refers to as “the problem of the other” in his book *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*. Briefly stated, the “other” becomes a problem for a project like that of Kant or Fichte because if all philosophy begins with the activity of a transcendental subject, a subject that is simply understood as a formal necessity for grounding all knowledge claims, then it seems as if

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13 I should note that both thinkers of his own time as well as contemporary scholars have pointed out quite a few difficulties with Fichte’s arguments in the 1794 WL. He too was completely dissatisfied with it so he kept on rewriting it.
all that the transcendental subject can be truly aware of is its own activity. The other, then, would either be reduced to being an object in the world or just another posit of the transcendental ego. Either way, the difficulty with such a position is both readily apparent and quite staggering. If the other is a mere posit or just an object in the world, how can we possibly speak of an ethical or political responsibility toward others? Furthermore, we could in principle have no true knowledge of the other.

Fichte was aware of this problem long before he began writing *Foundations of Natural Right* (henceforth simply *Natural Right*). In a set of popular lectures, titled *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation*, given to large nonacademic audiences, Fichte himself poses the questions which were asked above: “How does a man come to assume that there are rational beings like himself apart from him? And how does he come to recognize them, since they are certainly not immediately present to his pure self-consciousness?” (*EPW*, 153) His answer to this question is a tentative formulation of the theory of recognition that he will develop much more fully and explicitly in *Natural Right*. He tells us that

One of man’s fundamental drives is to be permitted to assume that rational beings like himself exist outside of him. He can assume this only on the condition that he enter into society…with these beings. Consequently, the social drive is one of man’s fundamental drives. It is man’s *destiny* to live in society; he *ought* to live in society. One who lives in isolation is not a complete human being. He contradicts his own self (*EPW*, 156).

The basic underlying argument that drives this statement is that freedom, which is the foundation for all philosophy and self-consciousness as a positing activity, is ultimately a
meaningless concept outside of the practical sphere of human interaction. I cannot be said
to be free in any meaningful way if there isn’t a sphere in which I can exercise my
freedom. The only such possible sphere is the social one. Thus, we must assume that
there are others.

Assuming that there are others, however, is not nearly as strong of a position as
arguing for and proving why there must be others. In *Natural Right* Fichte makes the
precepts that are implicit in *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholars Vocation* explicit. It
is there that we get what is perhaps the very first philosophical formulation of
intersubjectivity, argued for on the grounds of recognition. Fichte’s argument relies on
four fundamental steps, put forward as theorems (and an inference in the case of #2),
which are developed in length after he lays them out. They are:

1) A finite rational being cannot posit itself without ascribing a free efficacy to itself
   (*FNR*, 18).

2) By thus positing its capacity to exercise free efficacy, the rational being posits and
determines a sensible world outside of itself (*FNR*, 24).

3) The finite rational being cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy in the sensible
world without also ascribing such efficacy to others, and thus without also
presupposing the existence of other finite rational beings outside of itself (*FNR*,
29).

4) The finite rational being cannot assume the existence of other finite rational
beings outside it without positing itself as standing with those beings in a
particular relation, called a relation of right (*FNR*, 39).
The basic argument of these four theorems, which we must elaborate in some detail in order to grasp what Fichte is getting at, is that subjectivity and freedom, the two theoretical presuppositions that drive the initial formulation of the WL, are ultimately contingent upon intersubjectivity and concrete political relationships of right.

The beginning of the argument, “a finite rational being cannot posit itself without ascribing a free efficacy to itself,” (FNR, 18) is basically a reformulation of the original opening steps of the WL. The theorem functions with a basic “if, then” pattern. If there is such a thing as a rational being, it could only be such a thing and it could only posit itself if it were free. The point itself is considered to have been proven because the philosopher has in fact undertaken the project of positing the I from a transcendental standpoint. In fact, because everyone has primordially done this in so far as they are self-conscious beings, the theorem should be self-evident to everyone. To be self-conscious for Fichte, necessarily implies that the I does not even exist without being actively conscious of something. As Fichte puts it, the “I is… its own deed and product simultaneously” (FNR, 23; emphasis Fichte’s). That is, I know that I am conscious and that I exists through the dynamic process of positing. The I is not a substance or substrate like a Cartesian I would be, but rather it exists only as long as it acts. This is no different than saying that all consciousness is intentional. It exists as consciousness of X, and in this case, as consciousness of itself as free. Once again, it must be free if it is to serve as a grounding principle.

However, the task here is to prove that the I is in fact free; to show with certainty that which was taken for granted in the original formulation of the WL. This leads to showing the necessity of positing the not-I or the object. The importance of this move
cannot be overstated. As Williams points out, the not-I (*Anstoβ*) is that which moves the ego out of its own self, out of solipsism and into activity (57). The *Anstoβ* is also that which further solidifies Fichte’s move away from purely theoretical philosophy into practical philosophy. Thus, Neuhouser writes:

Although it is possible to go further than Kant in accounting for the characteristics of knowledge in terms of the subject’s own activity, there remains an element of that knowledge which is fundamentally irreducible to the subject’s spontaneity. In other words, it is ultimately impossible to eradicate every trace of the nonsubjective (the “not-I”) from an account of theoretical knowledge. Even though Fichte has reduced the role of Kant’s thing in itself to that of a mere check upon the subject’s otherwise unlimited activity, representation is nonetheless impossible without this *Anstoβ*, and therefore the theoretical subject is irremediably dependent upon something other than itself, that is, upon the not-I (*FTS*, 49).

What we see here is that when the subject is accounting for its own activity, and trying to understand this activity as the ground of philosophy, it comes to the realization that the activity would not be truly possible without there being objects in the world and that these objects are in fact the impetus for this activity. This object or thing, the not-I, is responsible for the I’s representations (as we saw above). However, this means that the I is not completely free and independent, as the WL first posited, since it has direct need of the not-I. Since Fichte has eliminated the thing-in-itself from his system, which could have *theoretically* accounted for how the not-I can have such a major role in a system that begins with the free activity of the I, he must turn to *practical* rather than theoretical
philosophy as being the ultimate method of justification for the principles of transcendental idealism. He believes that this will allow him to preserve both the free activity of the I and the necessity of the not-I without turning back to Kant’s thing-in-itself.

As such, from the standpoint of practical philosophy, Fichte further tells us that the I “cannot ascribe efficacy to itself without having posited an object upon which such efficacy is supposed to be exercised” (FNR, 29) and that “self-consciousness is possible if the rational being can – in one and the same moment – ascribe an efficacy to itself and posit something in opposition to that efficacy” (FNR, 30). Thus, consciousness of the self in fact necessitates consciousness of another thing; an object. There is no subjectivity without objectivity, and, because the starting point of idealism is the activity of consciousness, there can likewise be no objectivity without subjectivity. Since human beings only have access to reality from the standpoint of consciousness, the carving out of reality into distinct objects can only be accounted for if we begin with a consciousness to which objects appear. This does not entail that objects are mere ideas, but simply that we would have no way to say anything about them without consciousness. We cannot move beyond subjectivity, and when we try to do so in thought experiments we are in fact always-already operating from a subject’s point of view, no matter how hard we try to get away from it.

Once the subject or I comes to the realization that it needs the object or the not-I for its free activity, it then comes to a further realization that the object can never fully account for this free activity. There is also need for accounting for other subjects. In a move that we will see paralleled in Hegel’s master/slave dialectic in the Phenomenology
of Spirit, Fichte argues in the third step that “the finite rational being cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy in the sensible world without also ascribing such efficacy to others, and thus without also presupposing the existence of other finite rational beings outside itself” (FNR, 29). It is here that the argument for recognition truly begins. As Klaus Brinkmann points out in his essay “The Deduction of Intersubjectivity in Fichte’s Grundlage des Naturrechts”: “The coexistence of free agents and their interaction presupposes as an a priori condition the idea of a community of individuals that, from a transcendental point of view, is prior to these individuals. A “we” here undergirds and grounds the freedom of the individual I” (7). So, it turns out that the first two dialectical steps, that the I posits itself as free and that in so positing must posit the existence of the not-I, is contingent upon this third step: we can only freely say I=I and then I= not-I in the context of intersubjectivity. Subjectivity is contingent upon and posterior to intersubjectivity. The pragmatic reason for why this must be the case is that the I cannot perform any of the steps that Fichte has outlined without having certain categories by which to operate. These categories are given to the I from the social context in which the I is situated. In order to perform the task of philosophizing, I must have a language to use, a set of texts which I have read that have taught me how to reason, and so forth. All of these I inherit from others who are there before me. Furthermore, from the perspective of transcendental philosophy, the notion of freedom loses coherence if it understood in solipsistic terms. A singular I is neither free nor un-free – it merely is. Freedom is a meaningful concept only to the kind of being that finds itself in a community that can either stifle or enhance its freedom. Since philosophy begins with freedom in the act of
positing, then this also means that philosophy begins with a necessary presupposition of communality. Subjectivity is only made possible by intersubjectivity.

It is for this reason that transcendental philosophy must leave the realm if the theoretical and enter that of the practical. The implication here is drawn out by Fichte: The human being (like all finite beings in general) becomes a human being only among human beings; and since the human being can be nothing other than a human being and would not exist at all if it were not this – it follows that, if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one (FNR, 37).

What we get here is basically an argument for what the ancients presupposed, grounded in the modern notion of freedom. Fichte is telling us that there are no human beings outside of a social context and that the community is in fact genetically and ontologically prior to the individual. “Thus the concept of the human being is not the concept of an individual – for an individual human being is unthinkable – but rather the concept of a species” (FNR, 38). It is at this step of the deduction that he argues that the other “summons” or calls upon me to act upon my freedom. This “summons,” according to Fichte, comes from outside of us, it is directed toward us by the other in the process of “upbringing [Erziehang]” (FNR, 38).

To speak of an upbringing is to make the definitive move away from the theoretical and to the practical. An upbringing consists of the acquisition of a concrete set of culturally handed- down practices (language, history, religion, an education, and so forth). The other who summons me to act upon my freedom, then, is a concrete living and breathing other. What this entails is that transcendental subjectivity is actually contingent
upon activity in the lifeworld, to borrow Husserl’s terms.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, since each step
develops and justifies those that came before it, both the I and the not-I are contingent
upon this “summons.” As Hans-Jakob Willhelm points out in “The Deduction of the
Individual: Fichte’s Effort to Complete the Jena \textit{Wissenschaftslehre},” “the ‘I’ must posit
itself as determining the ‘Not-I.’ But, as one shall see, the ‘I’ cannot posit itself as being
feely efficacious on the ‘Not-I,’ unless it is ‘called upon’ to determine itself to a free
efficacy by what it posits as another ‘I’ outside itself, another rational being” (37). What
Wilhelm is showing here is that the I cannot posit the not-I without an Other because
positing is an act of free efficacy, a free efficacy can only by realized if the other
“summons” or “calls upon” me to exercise my freedom. As it was stated above, a solitary
being which does not interact with others in some kind of social context cannot be
understood to be free or not free since these very categories are only linguistically and
practically meaningful in a framework where we share a life with others. We have
developed a language in order to communicate with others, which would not have
occurred if we had been the kind of being that was purely solitary (there simply would
have been no need), and we first gain a understanding of these categories through their
linguistic usage. Thus, the condition for the possibility of the very notion or concept of
freedom is a communal and social existence. Furthermore, in order to make the first
philosophical moves of positing the I and not-I, I need the other to give me the impetus.
They do so by first teaching me to speak, think, and reason, and then I am called upon to

\textsuperscript{14} I am actually overstating the argument a little here. To be precise, Fichte is attempting to go in this
direction, he even does state what is explicated above, but he never makes the full move to the lifeworld.
He keeps on abstracting from individuality, as Wilhelm nicely points out (38). The I keeps on remaining
the transcendental I of the WL instead of an actual living, breathing human being even though he makes the
arguments about being summoned by a concrete other. We will have to wait until Hegel to get the full
move to historically situated individuals.
act in various situations. Freedom itself, then, can only occur in a social context because actions can be understood as free or coerced only when they are directed toward an other.

This leads us to the fourth and final step in the argument for recognition in *Foundations of Natural Right*. The final step is where Fichte explicitly uses the term ‘recognition’ (*Anerkennung*, which is distinct from “summons” – *Aufforderung* in step #3). Here Fichte argues that if there are others outside of us, which there must be, then we absolutely have to assume that we exist amongst each other in a political relationship - a relationship of right (*FNR*, 39). Since we exist as free beings, the relationship of right is the recognition of each other’s freedom. I see you as a finite, rational being and not an object in the world in virtue of the fact that you are free, and you do the same to me. We recognize each other’s freedom, and we simultaneously realize that the recognition of the freedom of the other entails a limitation upon my own free activity. As Brinkmann tells us, “This principle [of recognition] is again based on the heretofore unknown dialectical argument that relies on the idea of a mutual limitation of my sphere of freedom of action over against the other’s sphere such that both limit their spheres jointly through an act of self-determination. The coexistence of a plurality of free agents is here brought about through reciprocal self-limitation” (6; my addition within the brackets). The argument for the necessity of limiting each other’s freedom is not unique to Fichte. At this point he beings to make fairly standard theoretical moves that would have been found in any liberal political theorist prior to Fichte. Since the I is fundamentally free, it bumps up against the interest of other subjects as it navigates the world. The other recognizes my freedom and I recognize theirs, but this recognition also entails a realization that there will be a clash of interests.
With the introduction of this classically liberal position, Fichte almost immediately drops the argument for recognition out of the picture. Instead of developing the notion that the transcendental subjectivity is essentially political, which is where the argument ended up where recognition was introduced, and showing us how this affects concrete praxis, Fichte instead chooses to focus on all the negative aspects of freedom. It is here that insurmountable problems begin to pile up for Fichte’s analysis of recognition. It is to these that we must now turn.

The Limits of Fichte’s Account of Recognition

Once Fichte has established that the turn toward practical reason shows that the other is necessary for establishing the self or I as a free being, thus making the other necessary for the theoretical project of positing I and not-I, he almost immediately stops talking about recognition (there are few references left throughout natural right, but it almost entirely fades into the background). Instead, he goes on to outline a non-ideal situation similar to that which Locke outlines in the Second Treatise of Government. According to Locke, in the state of nature we all have an unlimited amount of right to anything in nature and a finite amount of resources. What this means is that there will be countless disputes for scarce material resources. The way to eliminate this dispute is to enact government. Fichte argues along similar lines (with the obvious and substantial difference of his deduction of the concept of right, which Locke simply presupposes).

As we saw above, human beings exist as free and thus must exist in a relation of right toward one another. However, Fichte argues, there is no way to establish that people will actually respect each other’s concrete rights. That is, there is no internal way to
make people respect each other’s rights, so there must be an *external* method for the enforcement of rights. To say that there is no means of internal enforcement of right simply means that Fichte does not trust that we can regulate our relationships amongst each other by more or less peaceful means without threat from an external force. Fichte calls this external method “the right of coercion” (*FNR*, 88.) If we violate each other’s rights, which is very likely to happen, according to Fichte, we need a way to ensure that this act will be punished by external means (think of Hobbes’ argument for the need of the leviathan here). There must be a government that forces us to respect each other’s rights.

The question to ask here, then, is whether this is in fact consistent with his account of recognition. It does not seem to be. Recognition showed us that we are not really human beings if we do not recognize each other’s freedom. What this means is that the notion of right is not something that is added to the subject once they enter in a social contract, but rather *constitutive* if subjectivity itself. This means that logically we must exist in a relation of right to each other in such a way that it is internal to the subject. We have in fact always already existed in such relations if Fichte is correct. However, he says that when humans encounter one another they *mistrust* each other. They mistrust each other and are not able to solve the property disputes that will arise between them (*FNR*, 115). In order to solve the property disputes, they don’t turn to recognition but to *coercion* (outside force).

Robert Williams illustrates this point nicely, arguing that coercion in fact displaces recognition for most of *Natural Right*. In his article “The Displacement of Recognition by Coercion in Fichte’s *Grundlage Des Naturrechts*” he writes:
Mistrust is an intersubjective impasse. The solicitor or summoner cannot be sure of the other, and thus no reciprocal recognition and no intersubjective grounding or preservation of right seems possible. Since there seems to be no way out of this impasse, that is, no way to reestablish trust, Fichte turns to coercion. When laws are violated, order breaks down; against this background, the contracting parties no longer trust each other. They must place the issue of the security of power in the hands of a third party, whom they both trust (54).

This third party that they both trust is the governing body which will enforce the laws. It is an outside power. Thus, instead of establishing how a government on a community will function on the basis of mutual recognition, Fichte instead rehashes Hobbes and Locke. This brings us into the next difficulty with Fichte’s theory: his purely negative view of freedom - a view that is inconsistent with the basic tenets of recognition.

This view simply follows from his notion of mistrust. The other recognizes me as free and thus realizes that they must limit her or his own freedom (their right to everything, to borrow from Hobbes). But, we may ask, why should we think of recognition in terms of limiting our sphere of freedom rather than expanding it. There is a pernicious individualism sneaking into Fichte’s theory that is incompatible with its very logic. The hidden step that would lead Fichte to say that I must limit my freedom is the basic Hobbesian one. In the state of nature, according to Hobbes, I am free to take anything I wish with no moral repercussions. Whatever I can take is my own. However, I realize that if I keep on doing this, someone stronger than me can take this stuff away. In the state of nature might makes right. What I realize is that this is a terrible way to live,
so I enter the social contract to avoid the war of all against all in the state of nature. The presupposition here is that of a fully formed human being existing before it enters into the contract, the individual has the ontological priority over the social here.

Fichte is no Hobbes though. Recognition has taken us up to right, which was simply put forward by Hobbes and Locke as being natural to the subject (Hobbes) or God given (Locke). Fichte has made an argument for why it must exist. Without right, we cannot have freedom, and without freedom we cannot have subjects. Right, then, is a necessary component of subjectivity itself; a condition for the possibility for subjectivity, to borrow from Kant. The implication of this, which Fichte explicitly makes, is that the social is ontologically prior to the individual. As Williams puts it: “through reciprocal recognition, humanity is realized as fundamentally social” (RFH, 62). What this means is that freedom itself makes no sense outside of a communal framework. Thus, the other, rather than limiting my freedom, in fact makes it possible. The other or the community is necessary for me to even have freedom. Why should we speak of freedom as a limitation or me limiting my freedom if this is the case? A possible answer could be that Fichte follows Kant a little too closely in conceiving freedom as inexplicable in-and-of-itself because theoretical cognition can never reach it, and thus only negative. This, however, seems to go against the very logic of the argument described above. Therefore, as I will argue in the following two chapters, Hegel will show why recognition is to be understood as an enhancement rather than the limitation of freedom, and I believe that this is the only way we should think of recognition. The very logic of recognition, even in Fichte, points in this direction.
I believe that the above problem, along with the fact that Fichte drops recognition from the later development of his account of natural right, is not an accidental feature of his argument but rather indicative of a larger problem that looms in his methodology. Although he wants to collapse the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, his discussions of recognition get stuck on a purely formal level. As Wilhelm points out, freedom is the freedom of actual living, breathing individuals, but Fichte’s system abstracts from all individuality by focusing strictly on transcendental subjectivity (RFH, 38). Thus, rather than speaking of actual human beings recognizing each other’s freedom, Fichte is still conceiving of such subjects as abstract egos. That is, he is still stuck in the framework of a the positing I that is no particular person, and because he is stuck on an abstract I he ultimately doesn’t know how to apply recognition on a concrete level, instead of replacing it with coercion and other such concepts borrowed from liberal political theory. Recognition, then, ends up serving no concrete practical purpose in Fichte’s political theory even though he so strongly begins with this notion.

The final problem that Fichte’s account of recognition faces (or rather his application of the account) ties in with the previous ones. In his initial derivation of the need for a state, he makes the initial encounter with the other, the initial step of recognition, entirely contingent (FNR, 101). Fichte makes it seem as if the other was not really necessary for consciousness, since the other can deny the rights claims we impose on nature. Thus making it necessary to have a coercive method of enforcement (the state) if rights are to be possible. If the other can deny rights so easily, then it looks as if the other is already a fully formed conscious subject, making recognition seem like an afterthought rather than a central concept in the development of consciousness and
freedom. However, as we saw in the reconstruction of Fichte’s argument, we are *always already* in a relation of right toward one another because it is right that allows for freedom, and freedom in turn allows for consciousness. Thus, there is actually a very deep disconnect between theory and praxis in Fichte’s formulation of recognition, which is disastrous for a thinker who wants to collapse the distinction between the two;

The argument in the next two chapters will show how the ontology that is developed by Hegel will help us avoid the problems that Fichte’s transcendental idealism and Honneth’s materialists theory faces (even though Honneth would claim that he is not committed to *any* ontological framework). Hegel’s ontology, which he develops throughout his corpus, is a mixture of idealism and realism (the interplay between subjectivity and objectivity, if you will). It is a dynamic, historical ontology which situates the human being as a concrete being, a being that is conditioned by history, culture, religion, philosophy, geography, and climate. It borrows from many different traditions¹⁵ to create a unique picture of what it means to be a human being and recognition is at the very heart of that picture. It is to this that we now turn.

**Conclusion**

It can be safely said that Fichte is the first thinker to formulate an argument for grounding freedom and ultimately subjectivity itself on intersubjective grounds based on recognition. As such, his thought is truly unique. His argument for recognition is grounded in his effort to complete the Kantian transcendental turn entirely from the

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¹⁵ Hegel is drawing upon Aristotelian metaphysics and ethics, various ancient conceptions of the human being as fundamentally social, Kant and Fichte’s transcendental idealism, Spinoza’s monism, the German mystical tradition and Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*. All this is systematically brought together through his phenomenological account of the history of spirit (*Geist*).
standpoint of the subject, eliminating the thing-in-itself. In the effort to complete 
transcendental idealism from the standpoint of subjectivity alone, Fichte comes to the 
realization that he may have fallen into solipsism. In order to avoid the trap of solipsism, 
and in order to decisively complete his dissolution of the boundary between theoretical 
and practical reason, Fichte turns to recognition. The basic point that he made is that 
freedom and consciousness, which hold hand in hand for Fichte, are contingent upon the 
process of recognition, which occurs in the context of right and concrete human 
communities.

However, we saw that his project is plagued with several difficulties. He 
ultimately abandons recognition when it comes to his concrete analysis of the structure of 
the polis; he believes that recognition is tied to a limitation rather than an expansion of 
freedom, even though his initial argumentative steps say otherwise; and, finally, he 
ultimately conceives of the subject in purely formal terms. All of these reasons are 
enough to show that his recognitive project is incomplete. I would not say that it is a 
failure because the seeds of a better theory are contained within. As I have argued all 
throughout my critique, Fichte simply is inconsistent in following through the implication 
of his own initial starting points.

Even with all of these difficulties, Fichte’s importance cannot be ignored. In order 
to really understand where an argument takes us it is absolutely essential to retrace its 
steps in order to see its emergence and any possible missteps. Thus, I believe that one 
cannot truly see where recognitive theory will lead us without starting at the source. In 
the next two chapters I will continue to trace recognition through the work of Hegel, who 
begins heavily indebted to Fichte, but quickly ends up creating his own unique theory. It
is with Hegel, and especially the work of the late Hegel (the third part of the

*Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences - The Philosophy of Mind* and *The Philosophy of Right*), where we get the most well developed ontology of the human

subject based on recognition. It is also here, I argue, that we get the best and most robust

theory of recognition- a theory that can withstand the criticisms that have been leveled

against recognition in the past 15 years.
Chapter 3:

Hegel’s Early Account of Recognition:
The Unpublished Jena Works and Phenomenology of Spirit

Introduction

It is quite safe to say that recognition theory would simply not be what it is if it wasn’t for Hegel’s contributions. Despite the fact that Fichte is the first to formulate the theory, his work remained largely ignored until the late 20th century, being overshadowed by Kant who came before him and Hegel who came after. Also, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Fichtean recognition theory suffers from several conceptual failures; failures that Hegel does not end up repeating.

Hegel himself develops recognition theory over the course of many different works, slightly modifying, elaborating, and making essential clarifications on it as he moves along. He first develops it extremely early in his career. It serves as the centerpiece of his posthumously published pre-Phenomenology Jena writings: The System of Ethical Life (1802/3) The First Philosophy of Spirit (1803/4), and the 1805/6 lectures on the philosophy of spirit (found in Hegel and the Human Spirit).

These early works represent Hegel’s first attempt at presenting a systematic philosophy, where he incorporates facets of a Schellingian inspired reflection on nature (which I will not go into here as it is quite a ways removed from our discussion) along with explicitly social/political concerns. Because he avoids the explicitly idealist ontology that he will become most famous for later, although it is certainly lurking in the background, thinkers such as Honneth and Habermas focus on these early writings to
develop a theory of recognition. In the *Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth is quite adamant that this is Hegel’s finest formulation of recognition (he has recently began to incorporate Hegel’s later work especially the *Philosophy of Right*). Given the central place that these works play in Honneth’s own thinking, it is essential that we make a thorough study of them. However, I believe that in these early writings Hegel is at his weakest both as a recognition theorist and, more generally, as a philosopher. For one, the texts are *extremely* fragmentary, to the point where large chunks of arguments are missing, and the ideas are sometimes only half developed. One must do heavy conceptual lifting to reconstruct the arguments, often working *backward* from the methodology and ideas laid out in the published work, which, quite frankly, is somewhat hermeneutically dubious and not always particularly satisfying (argumentatively, that is) given how much more clearly these ideas are developed in his later thought, especially in *The Philosophy of Right* and *The Philosophy of Mind* (part 3 of the *Encyclopedia*). However, since they play such an important formative role in contemporary recognition theory, and since they contain several key insights, they warrant some close study.

My second main aim and focus in this chapter is the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is here that we get the most famous and most misused formulation of recognition theory in the form of the master/slave dialectic. I will retrace this famous argument, but I would mainly like to show how it represents a *failed* moment of recognition. Immediately prior to the discussion of the master/slave dialectic, Hegel points out what pure recognition would look like; a recognition that does not have struggle and antagonism built into it, and a recognition which sketches out what *successful* cognitive relationships look like. Furthermore, I will argue that recognition appears again in different key moments of the
text and that mutual recognition is developed only upon the completion of the

*Phenomenology.*

However, despite all of this, I am actually distrustful of focusing on the Hegelian notion of recognition strictly through the *Phenomenology.* The reason for this is because most criticisms of recognition like the ones that come from Patchen Markell and Kelly Oliver, take the *Phenomenology* to be the final word on the topic. I find the *Phenomenology*’s take on recognition to be an unsatisfying final world. Hegel has a much clearer and better formulation of recognition in part 3 of the *Encyclopedia (the Philosophy of Mind)* and *The Phenomenology* lends itself much too easily to a reading which thinks of recognition strictly in terms of the master/slave dialectic. This reading comes almost directly from Alexandre Kojève’s classic study of the *Phenomenology,* which was so hugely influential on subsequent French philosophy.

What we find in Kojève’s reading is an interesting and unique reconstruction of Hegel via Marx and Heidegger. It takes the master/slave dialectic to be the ultimate concept that guides the *Phenomenology,* and the overcoming of this dialectic leads to the idea there being an “end of history.” While a fascinating work on its own accord, it really is not at all faithful to Hegel’s text. Since so many criticisms of recognition assume a Kojèvian reading of Hegel, I will end by an examination of this key work. I argue that what Kojève is doing is actually Hegelian-inspired philosophy rather than an actual reconstruction of Hegel. The *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* really has much more to say about Kojève and his philosophy than it has to say about the *Phenomenology* itself. I don’t find this problematic in and of itself, but it quickly becomes problematic because it exposes itself to various criticisms that really have nothing to do with the original
formulation of recognition theory; the formulation of which I am trying to reconstruct and place at the heart of political theory.

Thus, my overall goal in this chapter is twofold (and I will divide the chapter into two fairly autonomous sections): first I will provide an exegesis of the early Hegelian works in order to understand the crucial steps that Hegel took that lead to his later, more developed theory of recognition. This will also allow us to understand the contemporary grounds of the theory, since Honneth takes these early works as the basis for his own formulation of the theory. Upon the completion of this portion of the chapter, I will concentrate on what I believe to be the penultimate insight in the early works – Hegel’s notion that humans are recognition. That is, he has a portion of the text where he argues that the notion of humanity is basically synonymous with the notion of recognition. This idea is crucial for understanding the overall aim of my project in this work as a whole. Ultimately, I too am arguing that in order to have a meaningful understanding of human subjectivity and political agency, we have to understand how cognitive relationships are an essential component of our basic humanity.

The second part of this chapter will include an exegesis and criticism of recognition as it is found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. By working through key portions of the text, along with Kojève’s reading of recognition in the *Phenomenology*, I will show that an overemphasis on this text leads to a notion of recognition that is filled with antagonism and violence, leading many political theorists to be suspicious of recognition theory as a whole. However, I will show that these suspicions are not truly warranted, since the *Phenomenology*, and Kojève’s rather idiosyncratic reading of the
Phenomenology, is in no way the final word on recognition theory. Rather, they are the stepping stones, and often missteps, towards a robust theory.

Part I:

The System of Ethical Life (1802/3)

Hegel’s initial formulation of recognitive theory comes from the 1802/3 work The System of Ethical Life. In many ways this work contains the germs of the arguments that will be repeated in the Philosophy of Right. Even the very title points to Hegel’s final formulation of what constitutes the completion of the rational state: “Ethical Life,” the communal being of people where freedom is realized. Because of the early works fragmentary nature, much of it makes more sense if it is interpreted and reconstructed in light of his mature work. While I would normally find such a procedure hermeneutically dubious since it reads back into a thinker’s past, assuming that he or she had later ideas already developed, I don’t think one is given much of a choice in this case. Dialectical logic is already in place in the text, which is not explicitly developed until the Science of Logic some 10 years later, and there are large gaps in the text itself that need reconstructing.

In the outset of the text, Hegel tells us that “ethical nature is also an unveiling, an emergence of the universal in light of the particular, but in such a way that this

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16 In the introduction to the text, H.S. Harris points out that the text was most likely a lecture course that was never intended to be read by itself without elaboration (5).
17 In his article “The Jena Years: 1801 to 1806,” Martin Bondeli argues a similar point to mine, stating that: “Hegel, in terms of both content and structure, pursues his encyclopedic system right from the start. The ‘extended science of the idea’ must begin with ‘logic,’ which in turn ascends to absolute determinations of metaphysical categories” (22). Because the text is a set of notes, which often simply trail off, it is often difficult to reconstruct the arguments of the text as a whole without taking into account the fleshed-out arguments that come after it.
emergence is itself something wholly particular” (SEL, 103). The text itself is not altogether clear about what a notion like this would mean (there simply isn’t all that much of an argument or explanation around it). However, read in light of his overall philosophical framework it begins to make sense. He is arguing that the emergence of an ethical order, Ethical Life [Sittlichkeit], manifests itself in and through particular individuals and particular cultures. The universal is by necessity embedded in a particular way of life because universals are not free floating entities like Platonic Forms, but rather embedded in particulars (echoing Aristotle). Thus, the universal “human” manifests itself in particular human beings and particular ways of life. What it means to be human is to be situated in this way. Furthermore, when he tells us that the emergence of ethical order is something very particular, what he means is that our ethical nature or ethical life didn’t pre-exist in some way or come about everywhere in exactly the same manner, but rather that it emerged in some particular place/time (i.e. Germany, China, or so on).

The emergence\(^{18}\) of the ethical order for Hegel at this point begins labor, which leads to private property and the first recognizable relationship – that of the family.

Commenting on the overall structure of the System of Ethical Life, Honneth explains that “to the degree that a subject knows itself to be recognized by another subject with regards to certain of its [the subject’s] abilities and qualities and is thereby reconciled with the other, a subject also comes to know its own distinctive identity and thereby comes to be

\(^{18}\) Before we get to the notion of labor, Hegel starts off with a brief and suggestive discussion of language, telling us that the initial “tool” for humans is speech, “The tool of reason, the child of rational beings” (SEL, 114). He also states that “The spoken word unites the objectivity of the sign with the subjectivity if gesture, the articulation of the latter with the self-awareness of the former” (SEL, 115). While I have the tendency to simply think of these remarks as leading us to the beginnings of subjectivity, given the importance of language in the formation of subjectivity, Habermas and Honneth read this as a proto-communicative theory. Couple this with an emphasis on labor, property and recognition, and it becomes quite clear why they find this early work so fascinating. It fits quite well with the overall aims of the Frankfurt school that were discussed in chapter one.
opposed once again to the other as something particular” (SR, 16-17). We see here that this changes the structure of Fichte’s conception of recognition away from the transcendental model of abstract subjects recognizing each other’s freedom to a concrete form of recognition where one is recognized for her or his particular abilities; who she or he is as an individual.

Hegel tells us that the act of laboring itself is something very particular “something downright single and subjective” (SEL, 113), but with the introduction of the tool, and later the process of mass production, labor is raised to universality. He writes: “in the tool the subjectivity of labor is raised to something universal. Anyone can make a similar tool and work with it. To this extent the tool is the persistent norm of labor” (SEL, 113). As we know from traditional liberal political theory the mixing of labor with the stuff of the world leads to the notion of private property. Fichte and now Hegel were not satisfied with this overly simplistic notion of private property. For them, private property can only count as private if it is recognized as such by others. In the System of Ethical Life private property is entangled with the family, and, ultimately, it leads to what can only be described as tribal warfare. The life and death struggle for recognition that is described as a struggle between two individual consciousnesses in the Phenomenology, leading to mastery and servitude, is first cashed out as struggle for honor over the violation of one’s familial property. We can think here of the duels and vendettas of the noblemen in any feudal society. (We will return to this notion shortly. Both H.S. Harris and Ludwig Siep make a compelling case for such a reading of the early work).

Since the introduction of the tool makes labor something universal, it is not the labor of another that can be recognized, but that which one labors upon. Furthermore, that
which one works on or makes leads to the first level of recognition of the maker as property owner.

Thus Hegel writes:

The subject is [not] simply determined as a possessor, but is taken up into the form of universality; he is a single individual with a bearing on others and universally negative as a possessor recognized as such by other (SEL, 118).

And

Property enters reality through the plurality of persons involved in exchange and mutually recognizing each other (SEL, 121; emphasis mine).

In order for something to count as mine, and in order for you to see me as a person, there must be a process of mutual recognition. I acknowledge this piece of labored stuff as yours, given that you have worked on it, and you do the same for my property. Property, then, is the ground level of the recognitive relationship.

What Hegel is doing here is a conceptual clarification of what must take place before the development of civil society, the state, and ultimately ethical life. At this point of the discussion we can understand his claims as functioning in a similar manner as the “state of nature” does in early liberal theory (Hobbes and Locke), with the extremely important difference that Hegel is not dealing with fully formed agents struggling for scarce resources; they struggle for recognition and through this struggle then end up developing into fully formed agents. Since there is not yet a proper state developed to
protect my property claims, recognition quickly turns into a struggle. We can once again think of a combination of Locke’s claims concerning private property and Hobbes’ state of nature, where I have the right to whatever I can mix my labor with (Locke) or simply the right to everything (Hobbes), but everyone else has the same right, thus leading to the war of all against all. The initial difference between Hegel and Locke/Hobbes is that Hegel immediately divorces this struggle from the individualism that is at the heart of liberal theory. The struggle, according to Hegel, does not happen between isolated atomic individuals but really among families (and later clans). The family represents the second and necessary level of recognition. That is, private property claims are ultimately found in and through the family.

The family provides recognition through the love relationship. Hegel tells us that the family structure has three different components: it is the place where one’s basic needs are met, it is the place where the sex relationship is fulfilled, and it is the place to raise children, and thus continue the species (SEL, 127). In “The Concept of Recognition in Hegel’s Early Manuscripts,” H.S. Harris explains how the different aspects of recognition work out in the family structure. Love is the recognition between self and other on an emotional level, but it is in marriage that “the parent must recognize the relative permanence of their relationship (quite apart from any system of formal public recognition) if they are to act as parents for the child” (244). That is, in the marriage relationship we have recognition of work before there are any formal public institutions such as church or state to make marriage legal. The simple necessity of taking care of children makes the two subjects realize their need for each other, and realize each other’s subjectivity in this relatively permanent arrangement.
Further along the way, Harris points out that there is another aspect of recognition that occurs in the family. He tells us that upon reaching adulthood, the father and the son recognize each other “and the son does go off in the world and do what the father has already done” (245). So, while there is recognition among husband and wife early on in love and marriage, there is not yet recognition between parents and children since the children are entirely dependent on the parents for care. This means that the relationship is ultimately grounded on completely unequal terms. In order to get meaningful recognition from an other, that other must be my equal (that is why the master/slave relationship in the *Phenomenology* cannot lead to recognition, the master simply does not recognize the slave as a full person, so the recognition they get from the slave is debased). However, once the child grows up, there can be recognition because there is now a level of relative equality.

As was stated above, since this is an account of the necessary components for the emergence of the state and ethical life, property claims here are not settled by families taking their claims over property disputes to the state and legal order – claims over property disputes are settled with fights to the death. Hegel tells us that theft constitutes a cancellation of recognition (*SEL*, 135). Since the family is the basic building block of society for Hegel, the family unit itself is the holder of property. To fail to recognize the property claims of a certain family is to fail to recognize the agency of the family unit as a whole. Thus, a property dispute ends up being a dispute for honor and it leads to a fight to the death in order to preserve recognition. It is in the context of this discussion that Hegel first introduces the notion of lordship and bondage that he goes on to develop in much more detail in the *Phenomenology*. 
Hegel tells us that in theft

The object stolen remains what it is, but the subject does not, for here, in the particular case, he is the indifference of the connection. Now insofar as it is not the abstraction of his tie with the object which is cancelled [as in voluntary alienation], but he himself who is injured in respect of that tie, something is cancelled in him - and what is cancelled in him is not the diminution of his possessions, for that does not affect him as a subject; on the contrary it is the destruction of his [being] as indifference by and in this single act (SEL, 135).

What we see here is that theft is not a matter of losing one’s property, because the loss of property in and of itself does not affect subjectivity. One can voluntarily relinquish property or lose it through chance and it is not an affront to one’s self. The theft is a direct attack on oneself as a person; it is by insult to one’s subjectivity since the other does not recognize me as the valid owner. In other words, it is a profound lack of recognition.

In this very early manuscript, Hegel believes that robbery can only be cancelled or reversed through bondage. He writes:

In the foregoing relation [havoc] the reversal is absolutely annihilating, because annihilation itself is absolute, and so the reaction, like the treatment of the animal on the rampage is absolute subjugation or death. But this relation the reaction cannot simply be the recovery of what was stolen, on account of the personal character of the injury, but instead is
only the moment of an establishment of lordship and bondage (SEL, 136; emphasis mine).

The gravity of the injury sustained by robbery, without recourse to a state apparatus to administer justice, is such an affront to the personality of the individual/family who is robbed that the only possible solution is to enslave the robber (if the robber is killed they of course could not grant recognition). However, Hegel goes on to tell us that what this really leads to is war, since “the robber is too bad to be a slave” (SEL, 137). Thus, as he states in the quote, this is only a moment of lordship and bondage, which would imply that other moments are possible.19

The next step in the text is a very abrupt shift away from the discussion of theft to a discussion of ethical life, the next and final step of recognition. How one moves from theft to ethical life is a mystery. As Harris points out, “because of the mutilated state of the text we cannot be certain how Hegel made the transition from the Potenz of the family and its goods to the ‘struggle for recognition’” (CR, 245). Needless to say, Hegel does transition to ethical life and the struggle for recognition. Here I would like to flag some of the things that he says in System of Ethical Life before we transition into the First Philosophy of Spirit and The Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit in order to attempt to fill in some of the blanks in the early work.

19 In the text he also mentions that the other moment of lordship and bondage happens when one person accrues too much wealth and the bondsman does not have enough so he is forced into servitude. It occurs because the bondsman is incapable of fulfilling his or her own needs (SEL, 126). Since this does not drive recognition in the text and is only briefly mentioned it is worth noting but it is hard to reconcile it with the other claims made above. The text really does read like a testing ground for ideas rather than a coherent whole.
In the section on Ethical Life, Hegel explains how the incomplete levels of recognition found in property and the family are realized at a universal level in the inner workings of the state. The way that he puts it, the individual only reaches her or his spiritual nature in and through ethical life. “In ethical life the individual exists in an eternal mode; his empirical being and doing is something downright universal; for it is not his individual aspect which acts but the universal absolute spirit in him” (SEL, 143). Thus, the theme of reaching the completion of spirit as the connection between subject and object that is argued at the end of the *Phenomenology* and finalized in the *Philosophy of Right*, is first introduced here. Through the relation of recognitive relationships, the steps of which are missing in the text itself, we get to the point where the individual reaches a self-understanding in the universal. In the state and the concrete life of the people, the individual realizes that she must have both particularity and universality in herself, but the universality only happens in ethical life. That is, one sees oneself as the embodiment of the universal when their identity is shaped through the state apparatus. Before, one got their identity and recognition through the family and tribe, but both universality and particularity were vulnerable here because the recognitive relationship was incomplete. The constant struggle did not allow one to move to true universality because it only saw conflict with the other. This can only be fixed with a formal system of recognition in the state that allows for the alleviation of these endless conflicts, allowing the individual to realize her or his universality in the life of a people (*Volk*).

Furthermore, as Harris nicely points out, the introduction of ethical life finally brings this *formal* recognition of property and individual rights, which are necessary to overcome the family and tribal conflicts that occur without a state. He writes:
Before the establishment of a general system of universally recognized legal rights, the security of property can only rest on a sense of honor (like that of Achilles, for example) which sees itself as embodied in all of its goods, and hence as ‘touched’ whenever those goods are touched against their master’s will (CR, 246).

We can think of Ethical Life and the state in general not only as necessary for completing the recognitive relationships allowing one to see her or himself as a complete person, but also pragmatically necessary for overcoming all the recognitive struggles between families and tribes. (Fichte also points this out in the Foundations of Natural Right, except that for him this was seen as a limitation of individuals’ freedom and, furthermore, he had no notion of struggle between social units like family and tribe but only among individuals.)

Hegel finishes off the System of Ethical Life with brief sketches of what the state would look like, arguing that “in all systems, theoretical or actual, we come across the formal idea that an absolute government is an organic central authority, and, in particular, one which preserves the constitution” (SEL, 161). What we see here is basically a clear statement of the anti-liberal basis for Hegelian state. It is not conceived as a simple aggregate of individuals which comes together to avoid the pitfalls of the state of nature, but as an “organic” whole. The state thus has an actual ontological status as a living unity, and the point of this living unity is to preserve the constitution. The constitution is in place to preserve the universal interests of the people. That is, it is there to take care of those aspects of life that mere individuals could simply not take care of. The examples that Hegel provides are the establishment of a system of justice, the establishment of a
system of discipline and fulfillment of people’s basic needs. As individuals, we are in principle incapable of doing any one of these things because they necessarily involve the establishment of systems of governance. It is with that that Hegel ends his discussion.

*The First Philosophy of Spirit (1803/4) and The Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805/6)*

Before turning to the second portion of this chapter and the discussion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I would like to fill in some of the blanks that Hegel left in the *System of Ethical Life*20 with Hegel’s two early works: *The First Philosophy of Spirit* and the *Jena Lectures for the Philosophy of Spirit*. Both of these contain germs of many ideas that will be robustly developed in the *Phenomenology*, but my interest here lies strictly in and what he says about recognition.

Quite similarly to the *System of Ethical Life*, Hegel begins his discussion with the notions of labor and the family, arguing that labor is the first step toward property and possession, and thus we can in some way think of it as that which begins the process of recognition. Recognition proper, however, does not start here until we get to the family. The reason for this is because one cannot get recognition from the object that one labors on because “the individual, as laboring, is active and the object gets superseded, while both still subsist” (*FPS*, 230). That is, the object in and of itself is irrelevant for the process of recognition because the subject transforms it. What is important in the laboring process (at least as far as recognition is concerned) is the subject’s effort and work rather

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20 For the most complete discussion of Hegel’s early concept of recognition, I would recommend Ludwig Siep’s *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*. Other than the treatment that is found in Honneth’s work, H.S. Harris’ two part volume on Hegel’s development (*Towards the Sunlight and Night Thoughts*), and small parts of Robert Williams’ two books on Hegelian recognition, it is the only sustained treatment of recognition in the early Hegel.
than the object itself. As H.S. Harris points out in his work on Hegel’s development *Night Thoughts*, for Hegel, “labor is analyzed as *artisanship*; i.e. as the realization of a form which is initially present to the mind as a goal of desire, in some external material” (*NT*, 322).

As we shall see in the *Phenomenology*, and shortly in our discussion of the *First Philosophy of Spirit*, “desire” becomes a central concept in Hegel’s discussion in so far as it is the feeling that leads the subject out of himself; the need to have one validated as a fully conscious being. First, this is cashed out in terms of labor and family possession of goods, and later in the *Phenomenology* it is cashed out in terms of consumption and destruction of objects which eventually leads to an encounter with the other and the life and death struggle. In the *First Philosophy of Spirit*, as in all of the early writings, recognition is first introduced as mutual and reciprocal recognition in the context of the family. “Individual consciousness proving itself to be a totality in the family means that the individual becomes itself in the other (Siep; *SRHH*, 279). The love between husband and wife allows one to recognize oneself as a full subject in an other and the other does the same equally. This is stable, mutual recognition which is free from struggle. Thus, Harris writes:

The whole theory of personality here culminates in a demonstration that effective individuality belongs property to the family as a household *unit*. The communal recognition, upon which all of these variant relationships depend, is properly a function of the *Volk* (*CR*, 238).
What Harris means here is not only that one gets a part of their recognition in the family, but, as we saw in the previous section, that the “individual” units that Hegel has in mind are not individual persons but really individual families. Furthermore, families get their recognition through society at large. It is within the framework of interpersonal recognition between families that the notion of “struggle for recognition” emerges.

Hegel tells us here that “it is absolutely necessary that the totality which consciousness has reached in the family recognizes itself as the totality it is in another such totality of consciousness; in this cognition each [family head] is for the other immediately an absolute singular” (FPS, 236). It is not enough to stop with recognition in the loving relation of the family since families only get their recognition as such from society at large, and families need to deal with others to ensure their survival. Thus, when “the family head\textsuperscript{21}” steps into civil society to deal with others, they now represent the family as a whole. Unfortunately, this leads to what Hegel sees as a necessary struggle for goods and scarce resources and a dispute over property/honor. As Siep argues, honor and property become necessarily connected:

It matters… that the other be excluded from my totality and that this exclusion be perceived by him as such. This is precisely what happens in the struggle for honor. Should my consciousness in any ‘particularity of his possession or his being’ be hurt or violated, it will show itself in that this externality ‘has lost its opposition against me,’ and also in the way

\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, Hegel believes that the family head is always male. I take this view to be highly problematic, and Hegel ought to be criticized for holding such a position since there is nothing inherent in the family head being male. However, this is the subject for another discussion.
that I exclude the other from it… Here Hegel also combines the struggle for honor with the loss of possession (SRHH, 280).

At this stage of the game, Hegel has replaced the Hobbesian war of all against all that happens over scarce resources at the level of what are basically individual, abstract agents with a struggle over property/honor amongst families, carried out by the heads of the family (the head of the family is to be thought here as the representative of the family as a whole, so any and all disputes over property/honor that are carried out by the head of the family effect the family as a whole).

Property is a part of my totality as a person and consciousness, and if you do not recognize my claim then the only recourse is struggle. Whether you insult me directly or insult my property or my family makes no difference since they are all a part of the same continuum; all such insults boil down to an insult of honor and lead to a duel. Obviously, this is a less than ideal situation, which the combatants see, and thus a way must be found by which recognition disputes can be settled without either bloodshed or slavery. This way is found with the foundation of the state.

According to Hegel, the spirit of the people and ultimately the state itself is the foundation for “absolute consciousness.” He tells us that:

The absolute consciousness is this the state of supersession of the consciousnesses [that share it] as singular; a superseded being which is at the same time the eternal movement of the one coming to itself in another, and coming to be other within itself; it is the universal, subsisting consciousness; it is not [the] mere form of the singulars without substance;
but the singulars are no more; it is *absolute substance*, it is *the spirit of the people* (*FPS*, 241-42).

In the framework of a correctly ordered state (we will see what Hegel means by that in the *Philosophy of Right*) the disputes over honor/property can be settled peacefully and legally because stable recognition has been granted. The individuals, who for Hegel were essentially families and the family heads which represented them, no longer see themselves as individuals. They become a part of the organic whole that is the state. The absolute substance, traditionally thought of as God or some sort of divine in philosophy, is for Hegel “the spirit of the people” (see quote directly above). It is thus not a substance in the traditional sense of the term, which signifies some particular things, but rather the *activity* of concrete communities. Without the state and stable recognition in absolute substance, struggle is necessary. Hegel tells us that when the family heads meet each other “they are absolutely opposed absolute beings for themselves in opposition; and their relationship is strictly a practical one, it is itself actual, the middle of their recognition must itself be actual. *Hence they must injure one another*” (*FPS*, 237-38). Each person thinks of himself as a full totality, a full being- for- itself, and since the other does the same, they set themselves up in a direct opposition to one another. The only way to overcome opposition in this practical relationship, as Hegel calls it, is through a fight. Thus, while struggle can be eliminated in the absolute substance, it is a necessary stepping stone to get us there.

With this in mind, let us briefly transition into a couple of final points from the 1805/6 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*. This set of writing reiterates and elaborates
upon the previous two books we have discussed. Thus, we see here a deepening of the
discussion of the family, the first ground for recognition Hegel writes:

The idea of the family is decided in these elements: (a) love, as natural,
begetting children; (b) self-conscious love, conscious feeling, sentiment
and language of the same; (c) shared labor and acquisition, mutual service
and care; (d) education [of offspring]. No single faction can be made the
entire purpose [of the family] (LPS, 109-10).

So, not only is the family the primary social unit and the first step towards recognition, it
is also necessary for all the functions that Hegel lists here. It is the natural seat of
recognition.

However, Hegel adds an element to recognition theory here. He tells us that
recognition leads to rights, but unlike anything you find in his liberal predecessors, he
does not believe that rights are a part of nature or present in the state of nature. They
represent humanity’s move toward society as a higher spiritual order. It is here that he
provides an extremely robust understanding of the individual being necessarily formed by
recognition. He even goes so far as to state that human beings simple are the movement
of recognition. This discussion comes from a discussion concerning the emergence of
rights, as it is essential that it be quoted at length.

Hegel states:

Right is the relation of persons, in their behavior, to others. It is the
universal element of their free being – the determination, the elimination
of their empty freedom. I need not spell out this relation or limitation for
myself and produce it; rather, the object, in general, is itself this creation of right, i.e., the relation of recognition. In recognition (Anerkennen), the Self ceases to be this individual, it exists by right in recognition, i.e., no longer [immersed] in its immediate existence. The one who is recognized is recognized as immediately counting as such (geltend), through his being – but his being is itself generated from the concept; it is recognized being (anerkanntes Seyn).

Man is necessarily recognized and necessarily gives recognition. This necessity is his own, not that of our thinking in contrast to content. As recognizing, man is himself the movement [of recognition] and this movement itself is what negates (hebt auf) his natural self: he is recognition; the natural aspect merely is, it is not the spiritual aspect (LPS, 111).

I take this to be the most important statement and argument for recognition in the early writings, because not only does it bring together many of the elements we have seen thus far, it also points out the strong ontological necessity for recognition for human subjectivity and political life. It is for this reason that I would like to finish up the discussion of the early work with this penultimate quotation.²²

There are several elements of recognition present in this quotation. We first see that the notion of human rights is grounded in recognition; as in Fichte, we are in a

²² The rest of the lectures simply repeat many of the themes that have already been covered here, with an addition of a discussion on punishment that is not relevant for the project here. Hegel finishes with a discussion of spirit as found in art, religion and science which also has many interesting points but is outside of the scope of this project.
relationship of right with regards to one another only insofar as we recognize each other as the holders of rights. For Hegel, unlike Hobbes and Locke, the relation of right is not present in the state of nature. As he states in the quote, right emerges in the framework of a society, where we leave the “immediacy” of our subjectivity as it exists in the framework of a state of nature. The person who is recognized counts as a bearer of rights and as a full individual, and, more importantly, the very notion of personhood here is generated through recognition. To have being as a person necessarily means that it is recognized being. He states this even more strongly by telling us that humans are nothing other than the “movement of recognition” or that “he is recognition” (LPS, 111).

Thus, not only is recognition an essential component in the development of rights and society as we understand it, it is also an indispensable component of personhood. This is precisely what I mean when I argue for an ontological reading of the notion of recognition. The very structure of human reality is such that one cannot have anything that resembles a “human subject” without recognition. Hence “humanity” and “recognition” basically become synonymous here. As Honneth astutely points out, this occurs developmentally in the love relationship between caregiver and child, allowing the child to see oneself as agent and subject by being recognized and nurtured as such by the caregiver (and society at large). It occurs and is maintained later on through our interaction with our family and others in society. When others in society do not grant us recognition, it quite literally damages us on both a psychological and ontological level.

When the other says that I am not recognized he or she is doing much more than simply insulting me on a personal level; he or she is in fact denying my very personhood. Furthermore, they do not just bar my practical access to certain societal goods (right to
vote, healthcare, full political participation, and so forth), as happens when one’s rights are denied, but they bar me from understanding myself as a full subject. That is why Hegel is quite correct in arguing, both in the early works and later in the *Phenomenology*, that by mis-recognizing me you leave with little choice but to fight in some way (slavery is also a choice, but a very unsatisfactory one that eventually leads to further struggle). This fight either happens quite literally in a duel, or it can happen on a more symbolic level. However, as Hegel tells us, there is absolutely no guarantee that this fight will be successful. That is why recognition can end in failure in the form of mastery and servitude. To see how this is overcome we must turn to the *Phenomenology*. Here we have the example of misrecognition per excellence – the relationship between master/slave.

**Part II:**

Recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

For many years and many thinkers, including Kojève and the ones we will discuss in chapter five, recognition in Hegel begins and ends with the master/slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While no doubt important, this section of Hegel’s work has really done more to damage our reading of recognition in Hegel, and our reading of Hegel in general, than anything else in his corpus. As was mentioned in the introduction, what I am mostly interested in doing here is showing the limitations of this account. As such, I will actually be substantially downplaying the importance of the *Phenomenology*

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23 I have a tendency to think that it will in some way ultimately boil down to a very literal fight in order for the recognition struggle to end.
in a robust account of recognition.\textsuperscript{24} Nonetheless, it is absolutely essential that we understand this portion of Hegel as clearly as possible. It is indispensable in the grand scheme of things simply because of the importance of the \textit{Phenomenology} for understanding the overall Hegelian project (this is especially true in Anglophone readings of Hegel).

The \textit{Phenomenology} begins from the standpoint of consciousness that is immediately certain of all of its beliefs – with a position of naïve realism. It could very well have begun at any point since the structure of the book as a whole is intended to be circular. The phenomenologist can trace the dialectic through any point and complete the circle. However, one can certainly tell a much neater story by starting from the simplest position, what Hegel calls “Sense-Certainty”. This is the point at which consciousness believes that truth is immediately present through simple observation of the world.

Hegel’s task through the \textit{Phenomenology} is to show the reversals and troubles of consciousness as it dialectically overcomes the limitations inherent in the various standpoints that it occupies, each one revealing its limitations from within a self-destructing into its opposite, while at the same time preserving some kernel of truth within a higher standpoint. At this step of the game, the dialectical method that Hegel is most known for is fully developed and in play. It leads us all the way from the immediate self-certainty of simple consciousness to the point of full self-consciousness and “Absolute Knowing”. The end point is where consciousness comes to the realization of

\textsuperscript{24} There have been literally thousands of books written on the \textit{Phenomenology} at this stage of the game and I have no desire to write yet another long piece. For a complete discussion of the importance of recognition in the \textit{Phenomenology}, I would refer the reader to Robert William’s \textit{Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other}. Williams spends the majority of the book tracing recognition through the entirety of the \textit{Phenomenology}. My task here is to develop a robust account of recognition by using Hegelian themes and ideas.
what it has been all along – mainly \textit{Geist} (\textit{Geist} simultaneously means both “spirit” and “mind”, and Hegel explicitly uses the term to convey both meanings).

The endpoint is along a treacherous road, and as Williams points out all throughout \textit{Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other}, the theme of recognition guides consciousness along its course, culminating in reciprocal and non-antagonistic recognition at the point of Absolute Spirit. Moving us past tragic recognition as it is found in the struggle between universal and particular in Antigone, and the struggle between faith and reason in the enlightenment, Williams argues that Hegel arrives at mutual recognition in forgiveness. He writes:

Hegel reiterates this identification of absolute \textit{Geist} with reciprocal recognition in the concluding paragraph of \textit{Spirit}: “The reconciling ‘Yes’ in which the two ‘I’s renounce their exclusive and opposing existence, is the existence of the I which has been expanded into a duality, and therein remains identical with itself. In its complete externalization and opposite, it possesses the certainty of itself. It is God appearing in the midst of those who know even as they are known.” This passage is the first explicit accomplishment and manifestation of the eidetic feature of mutual releasement. Phenomenologically, God is a mediating third, namely, the power of pardoning, forgiving, or the power of releasement and reconciliation itself that is grounded in love. Each releases the other from its vengeful counterclaim and affirms the worth of the other in spite of the offense. Forgiveness renounces revenge and domination. Each must
renounce its exclusive, vengeful claims and allow the other to be (RFH, 210).

What Williams points out is that the ultimate accomplishment and final point of recognition does not culminate in struggle or domination, or some form of complete understanding and assimilation of the other, but rather it culminates in allowing the other to be. However, this moves us at the end of our story, where recognition is manifested in the social framework of Geist through forgiveness. This is the part of the story which is almost never told when speaking of recognition in Hegel.

Before we can get to this final stage, Hegel takes us through consciousness struggling through the inadequacies of “Sense-Certainty,” “Perception,” and what he refers to as “Force and Understanding.” At the end of the first section of the *Phenomenology* consciousness comes to the realization that it cannot understand the truth about the world and about itself on its own. It’s encounter with Otherness, with physical objects in the world and eventually with another consciousness like itself (which has also yet to achieve the status of self-consciousness, as this only happens upon the completion of his account), lead consciousness to necessarily question the certainty it had first in its immediate perception of the world and then in its understanding of universals. That is, consciousness begins its struggle to understand its essentially social nature. As Williams argues, “the *Phenomenology*’s task is to educate and elevate consciousness to the universal-social standpoint” (RFH, 121).

When consciousness begins to uncover its social nature, there are two possibilities, both of which are to be found in the discussion of master/slave: we can have
a moment of pure recognition, where the two subjects affirm each other’s subjectivity and move on, or we can have a struggle for recognition which ends in the unequal relationship of lordship and bondage. Hegel tells us that as the human being attempts to understand itself as an independent self-consciousness, it encounters otherness all around it which is seen as being threatening to its independence. At first, “self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self consciousness is Desire” (*PhG*, 109). As Desire, self-consciousness attempts the preserve its independence by negating or consuming everything that is other. However, the minute self-consciousness consumes an object, that is, destroys otherness, it is back to trying to reaffirm itself, thus continuing its process of negating things. (That is why it can be said that we can never truly have self-fulfillment by constantly obtaining material possessions. We get one thing and then immediately want something else). In his article “Recognition Beyond Struggle: On a Liberatory Account of Hegelian Recognition,” Michael Monahan points out that the moment of desire leads to a contradiction: “this contradiction emerges from the simple fact that each effort to demonstrate one's status as a 'simple universal' by negating some object is itself proof that there are independent objects. If there really were no independent objects, if I really were the source of all that is, then I wouldn't need to swagger about consuming or destroying all that crossed my path” (396). That is, any reading of the Hegelian project that would have Hegel collapse all reality into mind is doomed to failure because Hegel himself begins with the inadequacy of such a position – objects refuse to submit to such a reductions because they stand over and against
subjects. However, they are also necessary for subjectivity, but in and of themselves inadequate since they cannot grant recognition.

Recognition between two self-consciousnesses is necessary in order to get out of the moment of Desire, which is incapable of proving our independence as a self-consciousness because it is caught in a constant loop of negation and destruction. So, when I encounter an other who also has a self-consciousness, I see that this other is an object for me, but not in the same sense as the immaterial objects that I have been consuming. "A self-consciousness, in being an object, is as much an 'I' as 'object' (PhG, 110). I also see that the other is an independent self-consciousness and that I am an object for the other. In the realization that I am an object for the other, I must exercise my conscious capacities or faculties, thus explicitly realizing that I am in fact an independent self-consciousness. The other does the same thing and comes to the same conclusion. Monahan illustrates this with an example, writing:

Matt, in recognizing Mary, affirms openly that she is another self-conscious agent like himself. This in turn means that Matt recognizes that he is himself an object for Mary's consciousness – he is an other for her, because she, like him, is capable of consciously attending to the world around her. This is important first because Matt is acknowledging their shared status as subjects, and second because in order for Matt to realize that he is an object for Mary's consciousness, he must exercise his own subjectivity – he has to perform this realization that he is an object of Mary's consciousness as an agent. In other words, Matt must manifest his
subjectivity in order to apprehend himself as an object for Mary (398 – 99).

Mutual recognition here comes from the use of one’s subjectivity to come to the realization of one’s status as being simultaneously subject and object for the other, and the reflection of the same status for the other. Once this happens, both are elevated to the level of self-consciousness and affirm each other’s freedom.

The other important thing to once again note here is that the process of mutual recognition, which first allows for the concrete realization of self-consciousness in the world and then gives us a basis for the organization of the state, involves the affirmation both of the universality of self-consciousness, that is, our common shared humanity, as well as the concrete particularity of distinct human beings. In his book *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, Williams makes this similar point by telling us that “mutual-reciprocal recognition is possible only if coercion is renounced. The authentic ‘cancellation’ of other being means that the other is not eliminated but allowed to go free and affirmed. But if the other is allowed to go free, this means that it is affirmed not only in its identity, but also in its difference” (56). The identity means that we are both the same in the sense that we share a common humanity as self-conscious agents, and the difference is that we are still in fact distinct individuals. On the world-historical scale, this difference means that we are all situated and shaped by the particular place we come from, the culture we inherit, our shared language, etc.

I cannot overstress the importance of this section as an important corrective to the reading of Hegel which makes struggle and violence a necessary and unavoidable part of
his dialectic (we will return to this point in our discussion of Kelly Oliver in Chapter 5). However, it must be acknowledged that struggle is very much a part of Hegel’s narrative and that, historically and practically speaking, recognition has been seldom achieved without struggle. Nonetheless, it remains both a theoretical and practical possibility that at least violent struggle can be eliminated from recognitive theory with the correct social apparatus in place. What does recognition with struggle look like? We already saw a tentative answer to this question in the Jena manuscripts. Recognition with struggle results in a duel, and thus no recognition for one of the combatants, or servitude/slavery.

Instead of casting the account for recognition in terms of family heads fighting for honor, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel speaks of a conflict between two consciousnesses. Hegel argues that “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” (*PhG*, 111). Thus, although one can talk about consciousness and its structures in independent being, even possibly animals, self-consciousness has a fundamentally different structure. In order for me to be aware of myself as a “self” in any meaningful sense of the term, there must be another that acknowledges me as a self and affirms my conscious back to me. However, the first encounter with the other is necessarily flawed and incomplete because the self tries to reduce the other to itself. “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other it sees its own self” (Hegel; *PhG*, 111). At first the self is found to realize that it is not absolute, that all reality does not belong to it. This is a removal from an absolutely subjective kind of
idealism that one finds in Descartes or Berkeley. The encounter with the other shakes consciousness’ certainty of itself. As Hegel states in the quote directly above, consciousness “loses itself.”

In order to deal with the loss, consciousness attempts to reduce the other to the same. Basically, it says that the other is no real self but simply a part of its own subjective framework. As Williams argues, “Hegel’s view is that the other cannot be brought to immediate full presence except by reducing the other to self-sameness” (RFH, 150). This too ends in failure because both consciousnesses are doing the same thing (PhG, 112). It is impossible to reduce the other to the self because the other will not allow it. That is why the two must clash.25

When the clash between the two happens, two possibilities emerge: either one person destroys the other, which ends in a cognitive failure since the other is necessary for me to realize my self-consciousness, on one person submits to other and becomes enslaved. The second possibility grants one-sided recognition from slave to master – that is, the master gets recognition from the person he or she has enslaved, but this is by definition an incomplete and one-sided recognition, since it is not reciprocal. The slave recognizes the master as a self-consciousness, but the master cannot do the same for the slave since he views the slave as unworthy of recognition. Concerning this relationship of master and slave, Hegel writes:

In this recognition the unessential consciousness is for the lord the object, which constitutes the truth of his certainty of himself. But it is clear that

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25 As we saw above, they could in fact reciprocate the recognition, respecting and understanding the otherness of the other and its necessity to realize one’s own self-consciousness, but this does not happen here.
this object does not correspond to its Notion, but rather that the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of being-for-self as the truth of himself (PhG, 116-17).

What we see here is that the master, the one who won the duel needed the other, the slave, in order to achieve the status of being-for-self (a being who is self-conscious).

What has instead happened is that the master does not view the slave as an independent self-consciousness capable of reflecting his consciousness back to him or her, but rather a dependent consciousness that is little better than an object.

Because the master views the slave or bondsman as a dependent self-consciousness (dependent on the master for its survival), the master cannot in principle get recognition from the slave. Reciprocal recognition requires equals and the relationship between the two is anything but equal. Likewise, the slave cannot get recognition from the master because the master views the slave as unessential. What we have gotten is a failure of recognition – she gets her consciousness reflected back to her and thus neither achieves self-consciousness and certainty of oneself. As Williams points out, “since the slave does only what the master wants, the master cannot receive from him a genuinely independent recognition. So the master can never be intersubjectively ‘certain’ of his self-certainty” (RFH, 177).
It turns out that the real “winner” of the struggle for recognition between master and slave is actually the slave. The truth that is to be found in the master/slave dialectic literally lies in the hands of the slave. “Through this rediscovery of himself by himself, the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have only an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own” (Hegel; *PhG*, 118-9). That is, through labor the slave realizes his or her own subjectivity. He can literally see the objectification of his own mind in that which he has produced, thus reflecting his subjectivity back to him. Furthermore, since it turns out that the master ultimately depends for his survival on the slave, the master turns out to be unessential. It is the master who is the dependent consciousness, not the slave. “Although the slave lacks direct enjoyment of the products of his labor, he nevertheless comes to see the shaping and producing of objects is the key to the objective permanence and independence. Thereby the laboring consciousness comes to the intuition of itself in its products, of itself as the power behind its products, or as the genuinely independent being” (Williams; *RFH*, 179). What the careful reader will notice here is a huge disparity between the mutual recognition between subject and subject that we saw in the section preceding mastery and servitude and the ending here. The slave *does not* gain recognition from another subject; he or she gets recognition from the objects that he or she has produced. Rather, we should more precisely say that the slave has achieved the realization of her or his independence through work because the story does not end here. The discussion shifts away from recognition to a discussion of Stoicism, Skepticism, and what Hegel calls “the Unhappy Consciousness.”

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26 To be precise here, the reason that Hegel shifts to Stoicism at this stage is because the failure of
Because recognition as such disappears from the text itself here, many recognition scholars follow Kojève in identifying mastery and servitude with the entirety of recognition theory in the *Phenomenology*, or even in Hegel as a whole. I should note that recognition has *not* disappeared from the text at all. As we have already seen, it reappears in full force when consciousness realizes itself as *Geist*. Before I elaborate on this discussion, let us first turn to Kojève’s highly influential reading of recognition. By criticizing this reading, we can see how mutual recognition returns with a vengeance at the end of the *Phenomenology*. However, to be fair to Kojève and others who take recognition to end here, Hegel himself is guilty of leaving the theme at the end of the section of mastery/servitude rather than explicitly carrying it over into the section on stoicism. Williams makes quite a compelling argument all throughout *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* that the concept never truly disappears from the discussion. He argues throughout the length of the book that it implicitly runs all throughout the *Phenomenology*. I believe that he is fundamentally correct, but since it takes so much leg work to retrace all the transitions with recognition in mind, I think it is both pragmatically and theoretically better to concentrate on the later formulations of recognition. Even though the master/slave dialectic is an example of failed recognition, at a first glance it looks like it’s the whole story. This is what Kojève argues, and this is what Markell and Oliver pick up on.
Kojève’s Reading of Recognition and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

To say that Alexandre Kojève’s influence on the subsequent tradition in the continent, especially in France, is important would be quite an understatement. In many ways, the development of French philosophy would not be what it is without Kojève. He combines elements of Marx and Heidegger with a creative twist on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The way that Kojève reads the *Phenomenology* is very much entangled with Marxism. Rather than understanding the text to be a movement of consciousness on its path to understanding itself as *Geist*, he very much sees the text as anthropological account of the emergence of self-understanding through labor. Thus, what one gets at the end of the master/slave dialectic is the completion of history because the laborer understands him or herself to be the culmination of the dialectic. Subsequent sections in the *Phenomenology*, including Hegel’s notion of spirit or *Geist* are reinterpreted in light of this understanding. The Hegelian dialectic gets a materialist reinterpretation at the outset of Kojève’s reading and spirit basically gets purged of all idealism.

Following Hegel, Kojève begins by stating that humans are to be understood as conscious, but, unlike Hegel, he starts by stating that “man is self-consciousness” (*IRH*, 3) albeit unknowingly at first. For Kojève, self-consciousness is inextricably tied together with *desire*: “Desire is what transforms Being, revealed to itself by itself in true knowledge, into an ‘object’ revealed to a ‘subject’ by a subject different from the object and ‘opposed’ to it” (*IRH*, 3-4); and, through desire “man is revealed – to himself and to others – as an I” (*IRH*, 4). By placing desire at the center of subjectivity, Kojève is already moving away from the Hegelian understanding of the person. Instead of thinking of the subject as spirit, as a being governed and struggling with different ideas of what it
means to be a subject, Kojève is making the subject into primarily a *willing* being. This in some ways echoes Schopenhauer’s notion of the person as being primarily driven by will, or base desire for life, who only has developed consciousness as a sheer accident.

With desire guiding the dialectic and subjectivity at the outset, the reading we get of Hegel will necessarily end up differently. When Kojève states that “human history is the history of desired Desires” (*IRH*, 6), he is essentially materializing the Hegelian dialectic. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel argued that the central desire human beings had was to understand themselves as permanent and whole, but this desire could not be fulfilled until one realizes that the other is necessary for this project. The self is essentially *not* permanent and whole; it needs the other in order to see itself as a whole, but with this comes the realization that its own reality is embedded in the larger social reality. When Kojève is using the term “desire” here he is changing its meaning. To say that human history can be boiled down to desire essentially states that humans are engaged in a struggle for scarce resources. There are many things that we want to obtain but cannot do so because of scarcity. While this is true, it is not what Hegel had in mind when he introduces the notion of desire. This will become especially apparent as we follow Kojève through to the end of the master/slave dialectic.

Kojève explains that desire eventually turns toward the risk of one’s life for what is a “nonvital” end (*IRH*, 6-7). To speak of a non-vital end simply means that humans are willing to risk their lives for things that are not immediately necessary for their biological survival. Our desires lead to a struggle for recognition; a struggle that will only end with the realization on behalf of the slaves that they are the ones who hold the power of production, the power to transform the material world as they see fit. At first however, as
we already have seen in Hegel, we get an encounter of one consciousness with another. The initial encounter, according to Kojève, is between two consciousnesses that are aware of their own certainty, but not the certainty of the other (IRH, 10). Since this is the case, they must prove to the other their own certainty. This happens in and through the life and death struggle: “Only by the risk of life does it come to light that self-consciousness is nothing but pure Being-for-itself” (IRH, 12).

Thus, for Kojève, the struggle that happens in the encounter between self and other is necessary. He calls the master/slave dialectic “Pure” recognition (IRH, 9-10), which, as we have already seen, is not what Hegel means by the term. Pure recognition happens without a struggle and without mastery/servitude. Kojève simply ignores and leaves out of his discussion the passages which comment on the possibility of pure recognition. As Richard A. Lynch points out in “Mutual Recognition and the Dialectic of Master and Slave: Reading Hegel against Kojève,” “by omitting the key passages where Hegel underscores the mutuality of recognition, Kojève casts this dialectic as much more confrontational, one-dimensional, and uni-directional than in fact is the case in Hegel’s story” (34). The uni-directionality that Lynch is speaking of in this quote has to do with the one-sided flow of recognition which happens when the master wins the battle over the slave, leading the master to first gain recognition from the slave without reciprocating. The master sees his or her own subjectivity recognized but does not do the same for the slave.

However, the uni-directionality does not simply end here. It also occurs upon what Kojève sees as the completion of the dialectic – the realization of freedom on behalf of the slave in her or his work. Because the master becomes entirely reliant on the slave
for all her or his needs, the master becomes idle or inessential. She or he does not get recognition from the slave because the slave is perceived as unworthy of granting it, but at the same time the master does nothing. So, Kojève argues, “If idle Mastery is an impasse, laborious Slavery, in contrast, is the source of all human, social, historical progress. History is the history of the working Slave” (IRH, 20). Kojève’s Marxism and materialism clearly shines through here. History is understood as the history of labor, ultimately reducible to work and economics. Since the master does not labor, he does not have a history.

This is certainly not what Hegel had in mind, but it also seems a bit historically naïve. Although the master does not labor, the master holds power through either the perceived or real threat of violence. By risking their life in the life and death struggle and winning the position of the master, as both Kojève and Hegel point out, they no longer fear death. In many ways, the labor that the master still performs is that of war. Even if the master does not fight himself, he sends others to do so. To reduce history simply to labor, ignoring the effects that mastery has on the world through war and oppression, seems to miss a vital part of what has unfortunately been a major driving force of civilization. Granted, wars have often been fought due to economic reasons, but the people who have initiated and guided them along have mainly been those that Hegel and Kojève call masters. To simply state that history is reducible to the history of the working slave is much too reductionist.

Kojève’s commitment to this thesis, however, is unwavering. He finishes all of his discussions of the dialectic with what has often been referred to as “the end of history” thesis. In a nutshell, the claim here is that the dialectic, and thus history as such,
comes to a completion with the slave’s realization of her or his own power over the world through labor:

In fine, then, we can say this: Man was born and History began with the first Fight that ended in the appearance of a Master and a Slave. That is to say that Man – at his origin – is always either Master or Slave; and that true Man can exist only where there is a Master and Slave. (If they are to be human, they must be at least two in number.) And universal history, the history of the interaction between men and of their interaction with Nature, is the history of the interaction between warlike Masters and working Slaves. Consequently, History stops at the moment when the difference, the opposition, between Master and Slave disappears” (IRH, 43).

The opposition between master and slave disappears when the slave comes to the realization, or better yet, when the slave gains recognition of her or his own self-consciousness through work. Since she or he is the one who produces everything, she or he realizes that the master is inessential. Therefore, mastery must disappear and with it slavery, since the two necessarily exist together. Since history is understood to be the history of the working slave, it too must disappear at this point.

This sort of statement is Kojève’s quite unique interpretation of what is taking place in the Phenomenology. Kojève goes so far as to say that Hegel himself basically completes the dialectic and the history of universal consciousness when he finished writing the Phenomenology (IRH, 35). This reading of Hegel is quite skewed. As Lynch
argues, “The dialectic of struggle for recognition which Kojève translates is, as Hegel explicitly noted, merely the one-sided view of this mutual recognition and cannot be grasped adequately without first understanding the mutuality of recognition” (34-35).

This is the gravest difficulty with Kojève’s reading – recognition is first introduced, and, as we shall shortly see, it ends with mutual recognition. The master/slave dialectic which Hegel describes ends in failure. It ends with misrecognition, not recognition, so when this is presented as the whole story, as Kojève and many others do, we get quite a misleading reading of what recognition is. The master does not gain recognition from the slave or vice versa. The slave gets a sense of self-consciousness from work, but there is still a whole lot left in the story (about 400 pages, or most of the text).

This brings us full circle to the end of the Phenomenology and the completion of recognition in the text in mutuality. In the culminating paragraphs concerning the nature of Geist, which is what the text has been building up to, Hegel explicitly describes Geist or Spirit as reciprocal recognition (PhG, paragraph 670). Speaking of an encounter of two consciousnesses, where one has done a misdeed against the other, Hegel writes:

The later, however, renounces the divisive thought, and the heard-heartedness of the being-for-self which clings to it, because it has seen itself in the first. This first consciousness which turns its back on its actual existence, and makes itself into a superseded particular consciousness, thereby displaying itself as in fact universal. It returns from its external actual existence back into itself as essential being, and therein the universal consciousness thus recognizes itself. The forgiveness which it extends to the other is the renunciation of itself, of its unreal essential
being which it put on a level with that other which was a real action…

The word of reconciliation is the objectively existing Spirit, which behold
the pure knowledge of itself qua universal essence, in its opposite, in the
pure knowledge of itself qua absolutely self-contained and exclusive
individuality – a reciprocal recognition which is absolute Spirit (PhG,
407-408; underlying emphasis mine).

What we see here is that consciousness can only come to grips with itself as an actually
existing individual only when it ceases to act as if it is the universal in and of itself (when
it gives up the futile pursuit for independent autonomy). Consciousness can only do this
when it stops to fight the other over perceived or actual wrongdoing, as it did in the
master/slave dialectic, and forgives the other for his or her misdeeds. Paradoxically, it is
only when consciousness renounces itself in this manner that it gets a hold of what it
actually is. Consciousness is Spirit or Geist; but it is only Spirit or Geist if and only if it is
mutually recognized by another. The other consciousness comes to this realization as
well because it sees what the original consciousness has accomplished when it abandons
conflict and antagonism in favor of forgiveness.

The importance of this move cannot be emphasized enough. The text itself ends
on the note of mutual, reciprocal recognition. The antagonisms that were present between
master and slave, the particular and the universal (the Antigone story), faith and reason,
and so forth, are ultimately reconciled in the Absolute Spirit. As Williams points out, “the
I… signifies, not the domination of the other by incorporation within my experience and
ego, but rather the spirit in community expressing itself in the power of forgiveness.
Forgiveness constitutes the transition to absolute Geist” (RFH, 209). Thus, the final point
of recognition in the text does not occur at the close of the master/slave dialectic, but in consciousness coming to its full realization as self-consciousness in spirit.

Absolute Spirit is understood by Hegel in quite concrete terms. Subjective spirit, at its simplest, refers to our understanding of ourselves as full human subjects, situated in a particular time and place, but also responsible for how we constitute the world. Since Hegel is an idealist, subjectivity must be explained and included in our understanding of the world as such. Subject and object co-constitute each other. Objective spirit represents the concrete accomplishments of human beings. It is literally the stuff that we create — both the actual physical things we make, but also the institutions we create. Neither can be separated from the other and both must be explained in order to understand what spirit is (the objective side explained in Hegel’s explicitly political thought). What we see above, then, is that it does not culminate in struggle; it does not even culminate in the slave’s discovery of his or her own self-consciousness through work, but rather in forgiveness and love.\textsuperscript{27} Ultimately, to fully recognize someone is to acknowledge them as a full subject while they do the same as a part of some concrete, living community. Also, it means that at the highest level of recognition, we are not engaged in struggle, but we forgive the injustices that may have been perpetrated against us. While this may appear lofty, and might be extremely difficult to put into practice, it nonetheless is an important theoretical corrective for the usual Kojèvian style of reading recognition in the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}.

\textsuperscript{27} This of course has an explicitly religious meaning for Hegel grounded in Christianity, but one can think quite easily of forgiveness divorced from a religious context. I see no reason why a non-religious person cannot forgive someone for a discretion. That is not to say I take issue with the way Hegel understands forgiveness, but some might.
Conclusion: Some Difficulties with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and a Look Forward

Part of the difficulty with using the Phenomenology as the primary account of recognition lies in the fact that Hegel initially makes it seem as if the encounter between the self and the other is between two independent, fully formed agents. However, this couldn’t be further from the truth. The initial encounter which leads to the Master/Slave relationship is not between two fully formed humans, but between beings that simply have the capacity or potentiality, to borrow from Aristotle, to reach the status of “self-consciousness,” or even more simply, selfhood as such. In this initial encounter, the “Self” which we speak of encountering an Other is really only a self analogously and not in the full sense of the term. It sees itself as the totality of reality because it is yet to understand what it really is. I believe that part of the difficulty stems from the fact that Hegel, and then we as phenomenologists, need a way to describe this relationship, but in our descriptions we end up importing categories of thought that come from the end of the dialectical process and do not fully apply at the outset. This occurs necessarily because we need a way to describe and write about that which is taking place, and part of this description is going to use categories that took a lot of time to develop. A more accurate way of understanding what is happening both in the account of mutual recognition and in the Master/Slave dialectic is to speak of a proto-self; a mere potentiality that gets actualized as Self only at the end of a long process (when it understands itself as Geist, or an “I that is a We”).

To be fair to Hegel, he tells us that the account that he is providing only makes sense when it is read holistically; that is, we must read each part of the *Phenomenology,*
and really his entire system, in light of its overall development. If we keep this important hermeneutical move in mind, it becomes clear that the encounter between self and other that is described early on never really happened in an evolutionary or genetic or anthropological sense. That is, it was never the case that two atomic things that we would understand as biologically human encountered each other out there in the world and one said to the other: “I recognize you, go free” or “I don’t recognize you so we must fight to the death.” This would be a liberal way of understanding the subject, where society is formed in light of individuals agreeing to form it. Rather, what Hegel is describing are the deep logical structures of human reality. Selfhood and subjectivity are necessarily formed through the process of recognition, which can be mutual or can read to a long struggle, but human beings as such are never found in nature literally encountering each other in the manner described in the *Phenomenology*. As we see at the end of the book, we are in fact always-already a part of society, situated in some particular place and time, having inherited a language and culture. To borrow from Heidegger again, we are thrown into a world. What Hegel describes are the structures that make that world possible, that make consciousness and subjectivity possible, and that make us as agents possible.

It is here that the early work can be quite helpful because he is not using the more abstract notion of “consciousness” looking to come to terms with itself, but the very much concrete notion of human beings interacting together in ways that we are very familiar with (which is why thinkers such as Habermas and Honneth latched on to these early works). As was the case with the ancients, humans are only thought of as such in the context of society (*polis*). Furthermore, throughout the unpublished Jena writings, and especially toward the end, we saw Hegel describing humans as recognition. That is, to be
human and to have consciousness is only possible via recognition, and this is found mutually in the love of the family, antagonistically in a civil society that does not yet have a way of mediating personal and property disputes, and at a higher spiritual level in the state. For Hegel, at this highest spiritual level the antagonism that was present with the arrival of property is reconciled and the family itself moves up from a merely natural phenomenon to the level of Geist. Thus, the love that was present in the family, allowing for mutual, antagonism-free recognition, can be used at this highest level as a possible guiding post for understanding how to move away from antagonism in other conflicts (we can think here of how Christianity and many of the major world religions conceptualize the highest and most difficult ethical mandates for humans in terms of love).

Anthropologically speaking, we know that humans have always developed along with some form of society. Early on in our existence, these were basic wondering hunter/gatherer tribal units that eventually settled down and formed society as we understand it today. This is of course an oversimplification of what is quite a complex phenomenon, but the basic point remains nonetheless the same – the individual is contingent upon the larger social unit rather than the other way around as liberalism would have it. As we have seen all throughout this chapter, Hegel gives the ontology that describes this simple observation. In the early work this is developed in explicitly political terms, and in the *Phenomenology* it is shown how consciousness develops and runs through a series of ideas, each containing the seed of its own destruction, to the level of self-consciousness. These ideas are not merely the thoughts of philosophers attempting to come to grasp with reality, but the guiding ways of knowing and being of certain
epoch (think here of the influence that Stoicism had on the very structure of the Roman Empire).

It is for all these reasons that I would like to shift the emphasis over to a reading of recognition in light of the later works where Hegel himself makes these points explicit. This is not to say that these early works are not important. They are extremely important for the development of recognition theory, providing key insights and paving the way for what is to come later, but they are certainly not the final word of the matter (even the later works cannot be the final word on the matter if we are to take the notion of the continuation of the dialectic seriously). Thus, Chapter Four will explore how we are to understand recognition in the later Hegel and how this is to serve as the backbone for my final conclusion: understanding human beings and their necessarily political nature in light of the ontology of recognitive relationships. I will show how this eliminates the main difficulties that recognition theory has been charged with when the focus has been directed to the *Phenomenology* and the antagonistic relationship between master and slave.
Chapter 4:

Recognition in Hegel’s mature philosophy: The *Philosophy of Mind* and the *Philosophy of Right*

Introduction

Chapter three illustrated the origins of Hegel’s theory of recognition. Jumping from Fichte’s formulation of the concept in *Foundations of Natural Right*, Hegel first removes the transcendental elements that run through Fichte’s formulation and argues that recognition is the grounds for love, rights, and solidarity. In the unpublished Jena manuscripts we get the basic outline for a theory of recognition, in and of itself incomplete due to the nature of the texts themselves, but nonetheless important for understanding the big picture of any overarching account of how recognition functions. The most important element in these early manuscripts, one that I will retain in my final formulation of the theory, is the notion that human beings are nothing without recognition – the very notions of humanity, subjectivity, and recognition are intrinsically connected together.

However, Hegel’s formulation of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* drops much of the overtly political talk that was found in the early manuscripts and instead focuses first on the nature of the recognitive struggle between master and slave, and then the eventual overcoming of that struggle in forgiveness; a moment that happens upon the completion of Absolute Knowing. Although the master/slave dialectic is of tremendous historical importance, it is often misread and taken to be the last word when it comes to recognition in Hegel. Honneth avoids this account due to the ontological
commitments of German Idealism, commitments that he does not share or agree with, and I want to avoid the account because it distorts our understanding of cognitive theory in general. All too often Hegel is read through the lens of Kojève, and we have seen the many difficulties with Kojève’s account.

It is for all of those reasons that I turn to Hegel’s late work to complete my ontological ground for recognition theory, where I will show that humanity and recognition are essentially synonymous. Thus the purpose of this chapter will be twofold. In the first part I will show how Hegel finally understands what recognition is and how it functions. This will take us through the “subjective” aspect of recognition in the *Philosophy of Right*. The so-called “objective” part here simply refers to the concrete institutions that must be in place in order to fulfill human freedom, which can be done only when all people have been granted full, non-antagonistic and violent recognition. As such, I will not and cannot provide a full commentary on the *Philosophy of Right*, because this lies outside of the scope of our discussion here. What I will do is to provide an overall sketch of how recognition functions in the text, including what I take to be some genuine shortcomings of the text.

The second aim of the chapter is to take the overall insights we have gained through the project thus far and apply them to a full cognitive theory. This theory will do what most political philosophers have explicitly avoided doing (albeit unsuccessfully, I believe) for the last century or so – bringing ontology into political theory. In many ways this puts me in the same camp as the ancient political theorists, but in no way would I want to go back to something like an Aristotelian account of the polis. It is both naïve

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28 I should state that I think that Robert Williams has quite successfully shown how recognition actually functions in *Fichte and Hegel on the Other*, but the Kojèvian reading has been tough to dislodge in most readings of Hegel coming from political philosophy.
and practically dangerous to think that one can or should do this. Rather, like Hegel had
done in the *Philosophy of Right*, I will incorporate many modern elements into the
account. I think that the advantages of explicitly bringing ontology back into political
theory are numerous. It will be able to more accurately describe and ground what is
actually happening in political life; it can diagnose many of the shortcomings of
liberalism, which has basically become hegemonic, dismissing many of the criticisms
that have come its way from communitarian, Marxist, and feminist thinkers; and it will be
able to reorient how we think of political involvement. With all this in mind, let us first
turn to Hegel’s account of recognition in the *Philosophy of Mind*.

**Recognition in the *Philosophy of Mind***

Part three of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, The Philosophy of
Mind*, follows the *Encyclopedia Logic* and *The Philosophy of Nature* as the completion of
Hegel’s final overall system: it is that system for which the *Phenomenology* was meant to
clear the ground. The structure of the book follows Hegel’s usual structure at this point of
his thought – the three part development, moving from the most abstract to the most
concrete. In this case, following the study of logic and nature, we get to the highest
manifestation of Absolute Spirit (the development of mind). The development of mind,
according to Hegel, follows from merely subjective mind, to objective mind, finally
reaching its culmination in Absolute Mind. As such, the highest achievement of mind for
Hegel is not to be found in consciousness per se, but in the development of the rational
state (the objective element), and finally in Absolute Spirit reaching self-understanding
through art, religion, and philosophy (the highest level of self-understanding). I should
note here that Hegel is not working with the definition of mind that would be found in contemporary philosophical theories. Rather, he is pointing to what would more commonly be understood as the rational element in the human being and in the world at large. That is why he can say that there is subjective mind (consciousness) and objective mind (nature, culture, the state, and various human institutions).

Hegel’s study of the nature of mind will of course be much different from contemporary research in philosophy of mind since Hegel is not particularly concerned with the empirical end of things, although they too are in there (albeit coming from early 19th century science). He explicitly contrasts the philosophical study of mind with a strictly scientific one, telling us that:

In contrast to the empirical sciences, where the material as given by experience is taken from outside and ordered by an already established universal rule and brought into external interconnection, speculative thinking has to demonstrate each of its objects and the development of them in their absolute necessity (*PM*, 6, Par. 379).

What Hegel has in mind here is that rather than starting with experience and testing it out, which will necessarily vary due to new scientific discoveries and evidence, we must rather put experience aside and look at mind as it is given to the observer to find its essential structures. As such, Hegel wants to show the necessary, ontological structure of mind.

Because Hegel does not want to make his study into an empirical one, he is also not very much concerned with contemporary questions concerning the possible emergence of mind out of matter. Needless to say, Hegel would oppose all ontological
dualisms, including those that would separate mind and body, and he would oppose any “naïve idealism” that would reduce all reality to a metaphysical substrate of mind. However, he very much does not see the mind as a particular thing to be studied in the same way one would study chemical reactions. Rather, mind is to be studied in its activity. “The highest definition of the Absolute is this: it is not merely mind in general, it is mind absolutely revealed to itself, self-conscious, infinitely creative mind” (PM, 20, Par. 384). That is, mind at its highest development is to be understood in light of its creative activity; it is not really anything outside of this creative activity. Consciousness is consciousness of something, either of an object or of the self. It is not a thing (an object such as a rock or a brain) to be studied through chemical or other sort of experimentation, but an activity (PM, 155, Par. 427). The overall point to latch onto here is that when the final argument is developed concerning the deep ontological structures of human subjectivity, it will make no real difference whether mind or consciousness is instantiated or reduced to matter, or whether it is an emergent property, or even whether it can be somehow conceived apart from body. These are entirely separate questions to be determined with further scientific and philosophical study. What I am concerned with is the demonstration that mind or consciousness or subjectivity cannot logically be conceived or understood outside of an intersubjective, recognitive framework. In Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency and Ethical Life, Robert B. Pippin makes such a point, stating that “being an individual subject is something like a collective or social normative achievement and the putative independence of such subjects is always intertwined with a distinct sort of profound, even ontological dependence” (HPP, 9; emphasis mine).
The first section of the *Philosophy of Mind* concerns human anthropology or, as Hegel also puts it, it concerns the nature of the human soul. This discussion is an understanding of the person in the most abstract level, detached from all particular commitments which make us what we truly are. Hegel tells us that “the soul is the all-pervading, not existing merely in a particular individual; for as we have said earlier, the soul must be conceived as the truth, as the ideality, of *everything material*, as the entirely universal in which all differences are only ideal and which does not one-sidedly confront *the Other*, but *overarches the Other*” (*PM*, 102, Par 406). This is a basic argument and restatement of Hegel’s idealist position. Once one makes a move away from thinking of philosophy in light of realist assumptions, it is necessary to step back and examine the nature and structure of subjectivity as that to which objects appear. Without an understanding of the structure of subjectivity, or soul as Hegel is calling it here, one cannot begin to grasp the truth about anything because the truth is always disclosed to subjectivity itself. Thus, when Hegel states that the soul is “the truth, the *ideality*, of *everything material,*” what he basically means that without an understanding of the subject, that which understands the universal, the idea, there is no understanding of the object.

What we also see in the above quote is that at this level of inquiry one does not yet have an understanding of a soul (or mind) as a concrete being or person that must stand over and against another being. Rather, at this point soul is left underdetermined – it is purely that to which objects appear. The soul at this point “overarches” the other; it is over and above the other. It becomes determined in the transition from the subjective
standpoint to the objective one. It is when the soul begins to get determination that we get to the necessity of recognition. As we have already seen with Fichte in chapter two, the standpoint of a solitary transcendental ego necessarily leads to solipsism, which is why Fichte brings recognition into his account.

What Hegel wants us to keep in mind here, and what we must always keep in mind when working through his thought, is that this incomplete, underdetermined standpoint is not some historical reality. It is isolated for the sake of phenomenological description, but its existence is actually contingent upon the higher more concrete standpoints. He provides this reminder in light of a discussion of ethical life – a discussion to which he is ultimately leading us. Hegel states:

We are well aware that ethical life is the foundation of right and morality, as also that the family and civil society with their well-ordered differentiations already presuppose the presence of the state. In the philosophical development of the ethical, however, we cannot begin with the state, since in the state the ethical has unfolded into its most concrete form, whereas the beginning is necessarily something abstract” (PM, 121-22; Par. 408).

Thus the anthropology that Hegel has in mind, where he describes soul in its most abstract determinations is actually contingent upon the existence of ethical life. It is contingent upon the existence of concrete human beings interacting with one another in real world situations. This is true for everything that Hegel has written: in order to

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29 I must point out here that this is just one element of the story. Hegel spends quite a bit of time talking about properties of the soul as such. Much of this is scientifically dubious and of little contemporary relevance. For example, in the section from which I pull the quote, there is also a discussion of the effects of magnetism on the soul and of clairvoyance.
properly interpret one part of the text, the whole text must be taken into account, and the further in one delves, the more concrete the text becomes. This is acknowledged by scholars but often forgotten in scholarship when some particular portion of the Hegelian corpus is placed under critical examination.

The movement away from the abstraction of the anthropology (subjective mind) toward what Hegel calls the ‘Phenomenology of Mind’ happens in a recognitive context. Recognition is the midpoint that connects the most abstract discussion with the most concrete; the most concrete being Hegel’s consideration of Ethical Life (objective mind) and Absolute Mind (the Absolute discovering itself through art, religion and ultimately philosophy). The discussion of recognition in the *Philosophy of Mind* is similar to the one in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but there are certain key differences that must not be ignored. Robert Williams points out that:

The *Encyclopedia* account of the concept of recognition is at once abridged and yet more complex than the account in the *Phenomenology*. The philosophy of spirit presupposes the logic and the philosophy of nature, and is conceived as spirit’s becoming conscious of itself, a “reversion” to self out of nature. The latter reversion is conceived as a gradual ethico-religious process wherein spirit liberates itself from nature and natural immediacy. Further, the outcome of master/slave is different from the *Phenomenology*. In the mature system, the possibility of mutual recognition transcends coercion and domination is clearly exhibited, and master and slave mutually and reciprocally achieve liberation together. From this perspective, the concept of reciprocal recognition is more
completely developed in the *Encyclopedia* than in the *Phenomenology* (*HER*, 69).

So, what we will see is that Hegel is more precise about the steps that must be taken to obtain recognition in the *Philosophy of Mind*. The vagueness and animosity that led Kojève to read the master/slave dialectic as a social struggle between classes, resulting in liberation in work, disappears from this account. Along with a much more clear account of the intricacies of recognition, we also get an explicit connection between recognition and freedom. Mutual recognition becomes synonymous with freedom, which is also conceived as one of the facets of existence that makes us essentially human.

Pippin points out that: “virtually everything at stake in Hegel’s practical philosophy… comes down finally to his own theory of recognition and its objective realization over time and in modern ethical life” (*HPP*, 29). To understand recognition is to understand what Hegel has in mind with all of his practical philosophy, and, if I may take it even a step further, without recognition one cannot really understand Hegel as a whole since *Geist* itself is ultimately constituted through recognitive relationships. As in the *Phenomenology*, recognition in the *Philosophy of Mind* begins with desire. The formal “I” or soul disguised in the Anthropology section comes to self-awareness first by a confrontation with objects in the world:

Self-consciousness, in its immediacy, is an *individual* and *desire* – the contradiction of its abstraction which is supposed to be objective, or of its immediacy, which has the shape of the external object and is supposed to be subjective. For the certainty of itself that has emerged from the sublation of consciousness, the object is determined as a nullity, and for
the relation of self-consciousness to the object its abstract ideality is likewise determined as a nullity (PM, 154, Par 426).

What consciousness discovers when it confronts objects is that they have no reality independent of the subject. The subject is capable of consuming or destroying the object, and the object’s universality is contingent upon the activity of the subject. Without a subject to perceive and categorize them objects cannot be said to have an existence. However, it turns out that the same thing is true of subjects. They do not immediately exist as they first believe themselves to exist.

When the subject attempts to assert its independence in and through its relationship to objects, it gets caught in an endless loop of desire and the satisfaction of said desire, thus never achieving actual independence (PM, 157, Par 429). The subject begins to break from this loop when it confronts another being, another subject, that is attempting to do the same thing.

There is a self-consciousness for a self-consciousness, at first immediately, as one thing for another. In the other as I, I immediately behold my own self, but I also behold in it an immediately real object, another I absolutely independent in face of myself. The sublation of the individuality of self-consciousness was the first sublation; self-consciousness is thereby determined as a particular. – This contradiction supplies the urge to show

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30 One can attempt to try to imagine the existence of objects without the existence of a perceiving subject, but what ends up happening is that our mind is simply construing a space without subjects but with all the usual categories that we apply to objects (size, shape, special location, even names). All these categories are essentially dependent upon the subject in some way, which is why any phenomenological investigation will insist that the understanding of objects must include an understanding of objects of subjectivity and vice-versa.
itself as a free self, and to be there as a free self for the other, - the process of recognition (PM, 157, par 430).

The I, which thus far has fancied itself as universal consciousness, going forth and destroying objects in order to affirm its own universality, has all of a sudden seen itself reflected in another subject. This is at first a kind of shock because this other self both reflects back one’s subjectivity and objectivity (insofar as we are a body in the world), but also undermines the self’s assumed universality. The self now sees that it is a particular consciousness, not consciousness as such. Because of this the struggle for recognition develops, since each self wants to affirm its university but is now faced with its particularity.

Williams explains this initial encounter of self and other, or self and self, as a movement away from immediacy. He writes:

Hegel conceives such a confrontation between two selves understood as abstract or immediate identities. Their self-identities are abstract, immediate, and exclusive. Their encounter takes shape as a contradiction that drives the process of recognition. Recognition is a process that seeks to remove or dissolve the contradictions of immediacy, abstract identity, and its parochialism (HER, 74).

Thus, the self who saw itself as consciousness personified, or as I, realizes that it is not simply that. There are other selves out there who challenge this notion and move the self out of its abstract immediacy and toward a notion of self that is socially mediated and concrete. However, the immediate self of I first resists this since it was convinced of its
supremacy. It thereby engages in a struggle with the other self. It looks to convince the other of its immediacy and universality.

This is where the master/slave dialectic enters the discussion in the *Encyclopedia*. Hegel tells us that “the process is a combat; for I cannot be aware of myself in the other, in so far as the other is an immediate other reality for me; I am consequently bent on the sublation of this immediacy of his. Equally I cannot be recognized as an immediate entity, but only in so far as I sublate the immediacy in myself, and thereby give reality to my freedom” (*PM*, 157, par 431). We see Hegel here explaining that in my first confrontation with the other, the other does not reflect me back to myself because we both conceive ourselves as immediate entities; that is, we think we are supreme and completely self-sufficient, without a need for anyone else. However, since we think that the other must be sublated in order to affirm my immediacy or supremacy, in this particular scenario, “sublated” is a very nice way of saying “killed.” In order to prove my immediacy, an abstract universality, I must be the only one around since the other also conceives of himself in this manner.

A contradiction emerges insofar as self and other both conceive of themselves as immediate and the contradiction can only be resolved through a struggle to the death. Hegel tells us that we affirm our ultimate freedom when we are willing to face death (*PM*, 158, par 432). However,

The death of one, which dissolves the contradiction in one respect by the abstract, therefore crude, negation of immediacy, is thus in the essential respect, the reality of recognition which is sublated together with the death, a new contradiction and a higher one than the first.
Zusatz. The absolute proof of freedom in the fight for recognition is death. The combatants, even by exposing themselves to the risk of death, posit the natural being of both of them as negative, they prove that they regard it as a nullity. But by death, naturalness is negated in fact and in this way its contradiction with the spiritual, with the I, is at the same time resolved.

This resolution is, however, only quite abstract, only of a negative, not a positive kind (PM, 158, par 432).

We see several different themes at play in this paragraph. First of all, we see that the death of the other is no solution at all to the problem of immediacy because recognition itself, which was necessary to realize one’s consciousness, is destroyed along with the other. The second element that we see is Hegel making an explicit connection between freedom and recognition. I affirm my freedom when I am willing to risk my naturalness (my biological body) for the sake of the spiritual\(^{31}\) (the reality of my consciousness). When I have risked my biological body, my naturalness, I affirm my freedom, but freedom is not realized because one of the combatants dies and thus there is no one to recognize or to do the recognizing.

Hegel goes on to argue that although recognition is essential to human reality, so is life. For this reason, one of the people engaged in the struggle decides to abandon recognition and instead choose life. Thus mastery and bondage emerge (PM, 160, par 433). The transition here happens similarly to the way it did in the Phenomenology, with

\(^{31}\) Pippin nicely points out the meaning of “spiritual” here for Hegel. He tells us that “being spiritual beings is a historical achievement of certain animals; not the manifestation of the immaterial or divine substance” (HPP, 194). This point speaks against readings of Hegel that would reduce Geist, and thereby all reality, to a Berkelian sort of idea (an immaterial substance). Hegel is not a metaphysician of this sort. He would refer to this kind of idealism as naïve idealism.
the glaring exception in the end of the account where master and bondsman reach freedom, mutual recognition, and universal self-consciousness simultaneously. However, the initial impetus toward these comes from the bondsman or slave. In reference to the bondsman, here referred to as the other, Hegel writes: “this other, the bondsman, works off his individual will and self-will in the service of the master, sublates the inner immediacy of desire and in this alienation and in the fear of the master he makes a beginning of wisdom – the transition to universal self-consciousness” (PM, 161, par 435). Without the proper context this passage is at first quite puzzling. Why would it be the case that the one doing coerced work would be the first to reach “universal self-consciousness”? The reason has to do with the context in which the passage is found. Here Hegel is speaking of the satisfaction of the needs of the community as a whole. The bondsman is the one who does all the work, providing for everyone’s needs, including those of him-or herself and the master. The master, on the other hand, is idle. In providing for the common good, the bondsman sets aside his or her immediate desires, instead focusing on the desires of others. This allows him or her to see the power of his/her agency and the eventual movement toward universality.

In the previous chapter we saw that the movement here is away from the master and completely toward the slave, who comes to a realization of her or his independence from the master through labor. The transition between mastery/servitude in the Phenomenology cryptically led away from recognition and towards a discussion of stoicism and skepticism, only to reintroduce the notion later at the point of Absolute Knowing. This led Kojève to posit the “end of history” thesis, affirming the end of
recognition in the slave’s realization of him or herself in and through work (the triumph
of the proletariat). However, as Williams argues,

Coming to oneself through laboring does not necessarily resolve the issue
of the need of and desire for recognition. Moreover, a reversal of the
master/slave relationship does not necessarily imply the end of or
transcendence of domination; it might only produce a new pattern of the
domination. In the Encyclopedia, master/slave is expounded as a relatively
justified transition stage from the state of nature (Naturzustande) to ethical
life (Sittlichkeit) (HER, 77).

That is, your work does not necessarily grant you recognition, and the master is still in
many ways the master. They have power other than that of sheer labor (military might,
for example, as is evidenced in the Ancient Greek world where only free citizens were
allowed to bear arms and fight in wars). Thus, recognition and freedom remain
unfulfilled. Furthermore, without mutual reciprocal recognition the reversal between
master and slave might just produce a reversal in regime – the slave becomes the master
and the master becomes slave – rather than universal freedom and universal self-
consciousness.

The structure of the argument for recognition and mastery/servitude in the
Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind suggests that Hegel saw this deficiency in the
Phenomenology account of recognition. It is for these reasons that he seems to have
changed key components of the argument in the mature account. I believe that these
arguments remove some of the vagueness of the earlier exposition, resulting in a much
neater and more compelling picture of how recognition functions. Here Hegel does not
end his initial discussion of recognition with the slave finding him or herself in labor. Rather, he begins with the slave and then introduces a realization on behalf of the master that the slave has gotten it right by postponing gratification in favor to seeing to the needs of the community. It is necessary that we examine this through a rather lengthy quote from Hegel. Hegel states:

As we have said, this servile obedience forms only the beginning of freedom, because that to which the natural individuality of self-consciousness submits is not the genuinely universal, rational will that is \textit{in and for itself}, but the individual, contingent will of another subject. Here, then, only one moment of freedom emerges, the negativity of egoistic individuality; whereas the positive side of freedom attains actuality only when, on the one hand, the servile self-consciousness, liberating itself both from the individuality of the master and from its own individuality, grasps what it is \textit{in and for itself rational} in its universality, independent of the particularity of the subjects; and when, on the other hand, the master’s self-consciousness is brought, by the community of need and the concern for its satisfaction between him and the bondsman, and also by beholding the sublation of the immediate individual will objectified by him on the bondsman, to recognize this sublation as the truth in regard to himself too, and therefore submit his own selfish will to the law of the will that is in and for itself (PM, 161-62, par 435).

The key differences in this account of recognition from the one in the \textit{Phenomenology} are substantial. The slave begins the process of breaking the contradiction of failed
recognition found in mastery and servitude by postponing his or her needs and working for the common good. Once this has happened, the immediacy of subjectivity is transcended. One begins to move toward the realization of the universality of consciousness. At first, the slave’s work is directed only toward the satisfaction of the master’s need, what Hegel calls the “individual, contingent will of another subject.” Through work the slave or bondsman realizes that they are free from the master because the master does nothing; he or she is inessential. However, this realization and this moment of freedom are meaningless until the master comes to the same realization. The master must renounce his or her individual, selfish will in favor of the universal will. When this happens, mastery is necessarily renounced because to be a master is to look only after one’s own will, and thus both mastery and slavery disappear. We come to the point in which mutual recognition and universal freedom are made possible.

Williams explains this above described moment by pointing out that “when the master recognizes the slave is a human being, he also observes in the slave’s laboring a postponement of gratification, a cancellation of immediacy, and realizes that the cancellation of immediacy is the truth of the master as well” (HER, 79). Mutual recognition, then, is the point at which I recognize the other as a full rational agent who is completely free while the other does the same for me. This happens immediately following the master/slave dialectic in the Encyclopedia rather than at the near completion of the dialectic, as is the case in the Phenomenology. Hegel further argues that

Universal self-consciousness is the affirmative awareness of oneself in the other self. Each self as free individuality has absolute independence, but in
virtue of the negation of its immediacy or desire it does not distinguish itself from the other; it is universal and objective; and it has real universality in the form of reciprocity, in that it is aware of its recognition in the free other, and it is aware of this in so far as it recognizes the other and is aware that it is free (PM, 162, par 436).

Thus, when there is mutual recognition, the self acknowledges the other as an independent being, free to exist on its own and the other at the same time the other does the same for the self. However, immediacy is negated here, so the other and the self also realize their need for each other, their necessary interconnectedness. Their need for one another is threefold: it is necessary to live among others to have one’s needs met; it is necessary to have one’s subjectivity acknowledged in order for this subjectivity to leave the level of mere consciousness and reach self-consciousness and reason; and the self and other (the former master and former slave) can only be free in an intersubjective, social context. Regarding the last point, they can only be free in this intersubjective, social context because for Hegel real freedom consists in having the ability and opportunity to flourish. One can only do so only if one is initially given the care and resources in a social sphere.

The explicit connection between recognition and freedom makes the Encyclopedia account of recognition all the more relevant for political theory. Robert Pippin takes this notion of freedom to be central to all of Hegel’s philosophy. He tells us that “being a free rational agent consists in being recognized as one, and one can only be recognized if the other’s recognition is freely given; and this effectively means only if I recognize the other as a free individual, as someone to be addressed in normative not
strategic terms” (HPP, 198). We can readily see why this must be the case. If I am in a position of authority and dominance, let us say mastery, I cannot help but to see the person or people beneath this position as unworthy. They likewise cannot do the same because what is reflected back at them is not recognition but some form of contempt. However, as this argument has shown, the so-called dominant position is actually the weaker of the two because the master is inessential. When dominance is relinquished, one can see the other on equal footing as a free being and thus finally see oneself as free since there is no longer complete dependence on the other.

When this notion is placed in a contemporary context, what we see is mastery and servitude replaying again in neo-liberal capitalism. The dominant economic paradigm prevalent in the business world states that the investments and capital of the wealthy are supremely important for the creation of jobs, stability of the economy, and, in general, for all the good things that everyone has. Without strong business one cannot have a strong economy, thus one ought to deregulate all impositions on investors. Although this isn’t mastery explicitly in the sense that Hegel describes, it basically functions along the same parameters. With wealth and capital locked up in a small portion of the population, the rhetoric that is always given is that we are dependent on their investment (they are the ones who take all the “risks”). However, and this is a substantial however, these investments are completely irrelevant without labor. Although there is a veneer of equality here insofar as the law is in principle meant to treat all equally, mastery and servitude are actually repeated in a different permutation. The “people” depend on the investment of the few, who view themselves as the movers of the world, but they in turn

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32 As I was watching the news this morning a commentator stated that capital will flow where there are least restrictions and taxes, leaving the comment at that in order to let the viewer connect the dots.
are completely dependent on the labor they buy. This situation is only made worse by the liberal individualism that is the *de facto* position of contemporary politics because most refuse to see our essential interdependence. All that this means is that freedom is stifled rather than expressed in contemporary life, although everyone believes themselves to be free.

What I say above is not a radically new critique of capitalism as I am directly drawing on the Marxist tradition. I bring it up in this context both to explain the general argument for mutual recognition and freedom, which I believe continue to elude us due to neo-liberal capitalism, and to keep in mind as a critique of Hegel’s notion of Civil Society as it will appear in the *Philosophy of Right*. As we will shortly see, Hegel believes that capitalism is necessary for driving the individual interests present in civil society but that it must be heavily regulated by the rational state. I think that the Marxist point that civil society will undermine the so-called universality of the state has been amply demonstrated by contemporary political circumstances. With this in mind, let us complete the argument in the *Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind* by working through its implications.

The first implication of this account is an establishment, through dialectical argumentation, of the notion that humanity is inherently social. Plato, Aristotle, and most of the ancient political thinkers have always stated that this is the case, but for them the arguments for *how and why* it is the case are simply absent – they take the notion that humanity is inherently social to be a fundamental, definitional sort of truth about human beings. What we have seen thus far in all of the different chapters is that self-consciousness, and the very notions of humanity and individuality, are nonsensical
outside of an intersubjective context. I develop an awareness of myself, my personality, and my subjectivity when I interact with the other (there really is no “I” and there cannot be one without this interaction). This abstract “other” is really just human beings and various institutions that are around before me, but the very process necessitates that there be an other. If we conceive of the argument as that which gets us out of the fabled “state of nature”, we can imagine here that through recognition human beings elevate themselves above their mere animal existence and become spiritual beings. We do this through developing language, tools, culture, literature, art, and as we shall see at the end of our discussion, the state. None of these things are even possible without a social, intersubjective context. If we conceive the argument as functioning at the developmental level, as Honneth does, then recognition between care giver and infant, where the infant gets his or her subjectivity reflected back to him or her right from birth, then recognition is always-already at play in human existence. Whether we think of this either in the ontological terms I propose or the strictly empirical ones advocated by Honneth, consciousness can be self-consciousness only in a social context.

At the developmental level, I am entirely dependent on the other for absolutely everything at first: my survival, my language acquisition, my inheritance of a culture and shared history that begins to ground my identity at the most basic level. In other words, without the other, I cannot become an “I”. All of the things that make us human are gained through recognition relationships. Even when those relationships are distorted, as is the case in racist recognition or misrecognition, I still develop and understand myself along the lines of the culture I inherit. Setting aside all the particularities of child development, culture, and history, Hegel showed us in the Encyclopedia that
consciousness can never get out of itself without the other. It gets stuck either in an endless loop of desire and its satisfaction with the destruction of the object or in immediacy. It can never be certain of itself without the other, and the same is true of the other. Furthermore, it simply cannot truly be without the other. This is essentially what I meant when I stated that recognition must be understood ontologically. It gives us the necessary structure of human subjectivity, and I take subjectivity to be the essential feature of human being (if we want to extrapolate the claim even further, all finite subjectivity would have to function in this manner). To borrow the Kantian phrase, recognition is the condition for the possibility of consciousness. However, unlike Kant I do not believe that this is a transcendental notion. It is immanently worked out in humanity’s socio-historical development, but nonetheless ontological because it extrapolates necessary and universal features out of layers of empirical contingency.

The second implication of this overall account is that any form of individualism, be it ontological or methodological, is misguided and dangerous. As Pippin points out, A new and different sort of claim for ultimacy in intersubjective relations would form the basis of an alternative political reflection, and the most important aspect of this relation is often a form of original, unavoidable social dependence. It is, so the claim goes, by ignoring or denying such original relations in a fantasy of self-reliance that we end up in those distorted or even pathological relations to others, even ourselves… At its most ambitiously dialectical the full claim is that acknowledging, acting in the light of, such relations of original dependence is a necessary condition
for the achievement of true independence, or true “self-realization,” or “actualized,” “concrete” freedom (HPP, 213-14).

While it is not clear that Pippin whole-heartedly agrees with this Hegelian notion, I believe that it has been established thus far that individualism, or rather what it means to be an individual, is in fact only meaningful in light of prior recognitive, and thus social/intersubjective relations. That is, individualism ought never to be a starting point for political reflection because the very meaning of the term is contingent upon the logically prior existence of the social. Since the “I” is dependent on the “We” in almost every sense, when we begin political reflection and the organization of society with an individualistic assumption, a skewed, even corrupt, understanding of politics is developed.

Human beings do not enter into a social contract, be it real or imagined for methodological reasons. Rather, notions such as “right” and “contract” are only meaningful as intersubjectively navigated categories. They can and should enter our political discourse only after we have understood the inherently and deeply social nature of humanity. This in no way says that notions of right and the protection of individual liberty are somehow evil or that they ought to be abandoned. It simply means that if I begin my discourse with these in mind, along with individualist assumptions about how the world works, there is no way to account for collective responsibility, or really anything past my own, usually petty, interests. Selfishness is psychologically powerful enough even when one does not have individualist assumptions built into the outset of political thought, but it becomes the guiding post of all our thought and action when one
starts with it\textsuperscript{33} (no matter how much thinkers such as Rawls would like to get us out of it with the noble lie that the “veil of ignorance” tells).

When these two implications are taken together, the outcome is that the primary ontological unity of political reflection and political organization is \textit{necessarily} that of the community. The community here is never to be understood simply as a collection of individuals. It holds both logical and ontological primacy insofar as recognition theory necessitates that there are at least \textit{two} beings present in order to have subjectivity. The community also has temporal primacy over the individual since one could not develop as a person without everything that is inherited from the community (care, language, culture, history, etc.). Now that we have developed the implications of the recognitive insights that have been found in the \textit{Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind}, as well as all that came before it in the earlier works, let us turn to the final Hegelian text under consideration here: \textit{The Philosophy of Right}.

\textbf{Recognition in the \textit{Philosophy of Right}}

This portion of my study of Hegelian recognition will serve as a general outline for what he has to say about recognitive relationships at the level of the state (and all that which goes into comprising a state). This will be by no means an exegesis of the work as a whole, since this would be impossible to do in such a short space and outside the scope of the project.\textsuperscript{34} This will also not be a full tracing of recognition all throughout every

\textsuperscript{33} We can think here of the hundreds of claims about the poor “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps”, or “why should I pay for this lazy person’s health care, education, etc.”, or any number of claims we all hear on a daily basis about us only having to support ourselves and ignoring the wider needs of the community, as if the self is completely independent and not reliant on the community. All these claims are even further fueled by individualism.

\textsuperscript{34} For full discussions of the \textit{Philosophy of Right} as a whole see Shlomo Avinari’s \textit{Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State}, Dudley Knowles’ \textit{Hegel and the Philosophy of Right}, Frederick Neuhauser’s \textit{Foundations of}}
portion of the text; given that Robert Williams has already done this in *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*. The purpose of this section is to show how recognitive relationships are conceived by Hegel at the level of a rational, fully realized state and what we can gain from his analysis. We have already seen a portion of how this will work in the discussion of recognition in the earliest unpublished manuscripts. However, unlike these early works, the *Philosophy of Right* is a fully developed text. It is here that we find Hegel’s most mature reflections on recognition theory. I should note at the outset that I will part with Hegel’s analysis in at least two key ways. First of all, I strongly disagree with Hegel’s belief that the capitalist relations found in civil society can be curtailed by state regulations in the way he envisions. Hegel’s praise of the Adam Smith sort of capitalism would not have been so strong had he seen it in action at a later moment of history (although to be fair to Hegel, he does in fact diagnose key problems with capitalist production in his discussion of the “rabble”). As it was stated earlier, it seems as if history has proven all too often that the economic functions of civil society will co-opt the so-called universal concerns of the state. Secondly, I in no way believe that a constitutional monarchy is the ideal political arrangement for pursuing the common good. While it might simply be assumed by the reader that a constitutional monarchy is not a viable political system for the 21st century, I want to make it as clear as possible. With this in mind, let us turn to an analysis of the text itself, followed by a discussion on how to incorporate some of its insights in a 21st century context.

As is the case in almost Hegel’s entire corpus, *The Elements of the Philosophy of Right* follows a three part division: that of “Abstract Right,” “Morality,” and “Ethical
Life.” The dialectical movement of the work is one of starting with the highest level of abstraction or indeterminacy and working toward that which is most concrete.\(^{35}\) As Williams points out, “the Philosophy of Right is an extended account of diverse mutual recognitions that are embodied in social institutions such as property, contract, morality, family, and state” (HER, 133). The initial starting point is where human beings first encounter each other through the recognition of property – I cannot lay claim to a piece of land or an object without the other acknowledging that the object is indeed mine. Without this acknowledgement, one can dispute the ownership and fight over it. Thus, the relationship of right is one where human beings recognitively navigate what belongs to each person. The recognition of property is for Hegel an essential moment in the development of human subjectivity as such, since to have property is to work on something, to shape and form it, and then to have the other reflect back that one has indeed done so. Hegel tells us that “taking possession consists in the immediate *physical seizure* of something, partly in giving it form, and partly in merely *designating* its ownership” (PR, 84, par 54). While liberal political thought often takes private property to be the ultimate ground for all further relations of right, going so far as to treat the possession of one’s body as property, Hegel argues that the property relations is only the very basic starting point for recognition and the development of the state. It is a necessary but insufficient condition to build relationships of right because even with the recognition of something as my property, there is no recognition of *me* as anything other than an abstract placeholder that anyone can hold. This is not a real person however, and,

\(^{35}\) Contrary to many shallow critiques of Hegel that follow Kierkegaard’s jokes about the Hegelian system, Hegel’s thought at the end of the day is very much a critique of abstract philosophizing rather than an embrace of it.
furthermore, even property recognition is fraught with endless disputes, leading Hegel to move toward the legal sphere of contract.

Contract is that which first solidifies the recognition of the abstract, legal person. I settle my property disputes through legal means (unlike in the unpublished Jena manuscripts, Hegel skips the discussion of the duel to the death here). But, as Williams points out: “despite the recognition inherent in contract, we do well to recall that this intersubjectivity is of a minimalist sort. What is recognized here is not the other as a total human being, but only the other qua owner, or legal person. This is a formal mutual recognition” (HER, 149; emphasis mine). That is, if we stop merely at the recognition of rights in our political analysis, all that we have done is to give the human being basic liberties and the king of personhood that strips us of all that makes us actual individuals. The property owner is not a person that I can get to know, speak and interact with in any meaningful manner; he or she is but an abstract placeholder for an actual person. Any one person is interchangeable with another. “The person of abstract right is a person in an abstract universal sense purged of the determinate contingencies of birth, race, religion, gender, and so on” (Williams, HER, 135). What this entails is that we cannot fully account for any possible injustices and wrongs (i.e. slavery in the Americas, genocide of Jews and of American natives, patriarchy, etc.), or, contrariwise, any remarkable accomplishments by a particular person or peoples. Because of this, abstract right cannot possibly be the whole story, although liberalism and individualism tend to take it to be the whole of politics.

Hegel clearly sees this, although not with the examples provided above, and argues that an impasse in alleviating concrete wrongs that go beyond property disputes
takes us out of the understanding of ourselves as abstract property holders and towards understanding each other in light of *moral* interactions. Abstract right thus passes over into a discussion of morality. According to Hegel,

> In connection with formal right, we have noted that it contained only prohibitions, and an action strictly keeping with right consequently had a purely *negative* determination in respect of the will of others. In morality, on the other hand, the determination of my will with reference to the will of others is *positive* – that is, the will which has being in itself is inwardly present in what the subjective will realizes (*PR*, 140, par 112; my emphasis).

What Hegel has in mind here is that when we recognized each other as persons in the legal sense of the term, all that we really recognized are a set of *prohibitions*, or a list of things that *we cannot do* to others (mainly it had to do with the infringement of property rights). This is surely an important moment in human history, considering that even getting to the point of recognizing the basic universality of all persons took thousands of years, with work still to be done, but this is not the whole story by a longshot. It does not include the *positive* responsibilities we have towards others – things that we ought to do for them.

The fact that Hegel includes a discussion of morality in a work on political philosophy speaks volumes on the kind of theory he will go on to develop. Many liberal theorists\footnote{We can think here of Isaiah Berlin’s worries of what would happen to freedom if positive rights were implemented.} would be unwilling to go where Hegel takes us because a discussion of morality in political thought means that Hegel will include positive rights along the
negative ones that were in traduced in abstract right. That is, he is willing to say that the state itself ought to do certain concrete things for human beings in order to allow for true freedom and flourishing. Most liberal theorists would argue that the only thing a state can legitimately do without encroaching on our freedom is to protect our negative liberties – it ought to insure that we don’t poke our noses into each other’s business. The basic reason for Hegel’s inclusion of a discussion of morality and positive rights has to do with his general conception of freedom. Instead of thinking of freedom as a list of prohibitions on others concerning me and my actions, he thinks of freedom as the ability to self-actualize. In his article “The Realm of Actualized Freedom: Hegel’s Notion of a ‘Philosophy of Right,’” Axel Honneth describes Hegel’s overall project as an elucidation of the concrete institutions that make freedom possible (that allow us to self-actualize), thus pointing out that Hegel “thereby departs from the mainstream of modern liberalism and opens up a path for another philosophical camp, which nowadays is termed either ‘perfectionist liberalism’ or, perhaps misleadingly, ‘communitarianism’” (IW, 24). While I do not believe that it is misleading to label Hegel’s theory as ‘communitarian,’ as there are many elements that can only be characterized as such, Honneth’s basic point here is that the move toward an analysis of morality and then the institutions that ought to be in place in order for us to have freedom, take Hegel quite far from standard liberal theory. This is because liberal theory begins with individualistic assumptions, arguing for the primacy of the individual over the community and the primacy of individual rights over the common good. Hegel’s political thought does not share either of these features.

However, it should be noted that the kind of recognition and freedom that comes at the standpoint of morality is still only a formal one. Morality goes beyond abstract
right insofar as it includes what we ought to do for others in a positive sense, but what we ought to do is understood in the Kantian fashion of imposing universal self-legislation. Hegel understands this self-legislation in terms of a three part process:

(a) The abstract or formal right of action, according to which the content of my action, as accompanied in immediate existence [Dasein], is entirely mine, so that the action is the purpose of the subjective will.

(b) The particular aspect of the action is its inner content, (a) i.e. the manner in which its universal content is determine for me – this constitutes the value of the action and the reason why I consider it valid, i.e. its intention; (β) its content, as the particular [besondere] end of my particular [partikulären] and subjective existence, is welfare.

(c) This content, though inward in character, is at the same time raised to universality and thus to that objectivity which has being in and for itself; as such it is the absolute end of the will, i.e. the good, and its opposite, in the sphere of reflection, its subjective universality, either of evil or of the conscience (PR, 141, par 114).

What we see in this quotation is essentially Hegel’s summary and interpretation of what happens in Kantian morality. I take a look at an action I want to perform, turn it inward for self-examination, and then raise it to universality. We can think here of the way in which a categorical imperative functions: I make a maxim of an action into a universal law of nature in order to see if any contradictions arise. However, we see that Hegel already has an implicit critique in this formulation that he will later on make explicit. For
Hegel, unlike Kant, this procedure of morality never reaches actual universal morality. It is stuck at the level of *subjective* universality (the maxim is a universal *for me*, but not a universal *per se*).

The reason for this is that for Hegel morality does not gain its truth until it is intersubjectively re-appropriated through the social sphere at the level of ethical life, where the formality of morality is filled in and fleshed out with real world content, which is dependent on contingent circumstances and the life-world of a people. As Williams points out, “the substantive basis of morality must be found in ethical life, and the moral point of view is a deficient form of, or abstract moment in, ethical life. Its universal consciousness is formal, and falls short of being a social consciousness mediated by mutual recognition. Morality presupposes the mutual recognition constitutive of ethical life” (*HER*, 179). The final point should be taken into account for both the discussion of morality and abstract right. Both are incomplete standpoints that are neither discarded once we reach the endpoint of ethical life nor temporally prior to it. The order of exposition in the *Philosophy of Right* is maintained because of the way the categories of abstract right, morality, and ethical life logically flow from one to the other, not because humanity first developed abstract right and moved on from there (Hegel would of course have been aware that abstract rightly only actually enters the historical stage with the advent of the modern period).

Overall, Hegel’s general critique of the moral point of view is ultimately grounded in the idea that it is simply much too formal. Kant develops a set of categories that, at the end of the day, only have logical validity (from the point of the understanding and not of reason since reason is dialectical) but largely fall apart when applied to the
intricacies of real life.\textsuperscript{37} What is essential about morality from the recognitive point of view is that it now begins to bring in the other more as a real person who one has positive responsibilities toward, not just an abstract placeholder. The way to preserve the truth of morality, then, is by filling it in with real world content which cannot be found from within the standpoint of morality. It is for this reason that one must turn to ethical life, the highest standpoint of political life and objective spirit. It is to this that we now turn.\textsuperscript{38}

At its simplest, ethical life for Hegel is the culmination of objective spirit. It is where the concrete achievements of a particular culture are finally realized, and where the rational state is developed. A state is considered to be rational if and only if all of the people living in that state are free and this freedom has been achieved through mutual, non-antagonistic recognition. The incomplete standpoints of abstract right and morality are made complete at the level of ethical life. It is here that rights are concretely realized, and it is here that morality stops being merely formal and becomes concrete. Ethical life itself is concretely realized in three institutions: the family, civil society, and the state. This division is also present upon the completion of the final part of the \textit{Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind} (the very last portion the \textit{Encyclopedia} as a whole). Recognition is the movement which allows consciousness to be raised to the level of objectivity and it continues to be the driving force behind all political/ethical relations.

As was the case in the unpublished Jena manuscripts, the basic institution of ethical life is that of the family:

\textsuperscript{37} Schopenhauer develops the exact same critique from a different angle in his work \textit{On the Basis of Morality}.

\textsuperscript{38} I should note that for the sake of brevity I have omitted Hegel’s critique of the ethics of conscience that was developed alongside Kant’s more strictly logical view of morality. This view is criticized by Hegel on similar grounds as the Kantian position. It is based entirely in \textit{feeling}, which is even more subjective and arbitrary than anything in Kant, and thus more dangerous, according to Hegel. This kind of morality was developed largely from religious thinkers in response to then reigning Kantian views.
The family, as the *immediate substantiality* of spirit, has as its
determinations the spirit’s *feeling* [*Empfindung*] of its own unity, which is
*love*. Thus, the disposition [appropriate to the family] is to have self-
consciousness of one’s individuality *within this unity* as essentiality which
has being in and for itself, so that one is present in it not as an independent
person [*eine Person für sich*] but as a *member* (*PR*, 199, par 158).

It is within the context of the family that one begins to realize that we are not
independently existing, immediate subjects but rather intersubjective beings. We have our
initial membership in society affirmed and reflected back to us in the family unity. This
is, so to speak, the basic building block of the larger polis for Hegel. On a practical level,
we first learn who and what we are in the family. We are taught a language, given a
tradition and identity, and so on, all in the family sphere.

The thing that holds the family together, giving the basis for all subsequent
recognitive relationships, is love. Williams points out that love serves several different
functions: “the concept of love for Hegel is both a speculative ontological principle and
an account of intersubjectivity” (*HER*, 208); and that “love’s ‘destruction of objectivity’
is not the elimination of the other but the suspension of objectification, domination, and
enmity that imply distance, separation, and alienation between self and other. Love
renounces coercion and domination, for the sake of its object” (*HER*, 209). Williams has
several points in mind here that elucidate what love does in the family sphere and what it
does for recognition theory in general. The love for the other means that one recognizes
the other for what they in fact are – a free, fully self-conscious subject. When there is
love of the other or subject, there is no need for something like a master/slave dialectic to
play out because the loving recognition of the other is necessarily mutual and non-antagonistic. For love to count as love it cannot be either demanded or coerced; it is necessarily freely given or not given at all. If love is not freely given it simply cannot be love. At the level of the parent and child, this occurs with a kind of “natural” necessity, and among partners it must be developed, and nurtured over time.

Hegel believes that there are three basic components/functions of the family: marriage, which is the initial union and foundation of the family unity, the holding of property, and children (PR, 200, par 160). Nothing in this is particularly controversial from a historical perspective, but we would need to make some revisions to account for the changing nature of love relationships. The love union brings the parents together in marriage, upon which there is a mutual folding of assets, and then the marriage is completed by having and raising children. Much of what Hegel has to say on the *Philosophy of Right* concerning the family and marriage is essentially unchanged from the Jena manuscripts. Marriage is held together not by contract, although there is a legal element to it when it is institutionalized, but by the mutual recognition that the partners have for each other in the love relationship. Speaking of the nature and function of love in the family, Williams points out that:

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39 I use ‘partners’ here explicitly against Hegel’s account of the family. For him, a family is strictly an interaction between husband, wife, and children. He views women as belonging exclusively to the family unit. Given all of this, he is both sexist and homophobic (and he has a very bourgeois notion of the family), which is not surprising given the time and place that he is writing. However, I take it that although he views the recognition gained through the family to function only through the husband-wife-child relationship, there are in fact no logical ground for why this has to be the case. Since Hegel would readily admit that all philosophers are a product of their time, his thinking on this issue clearly demonstrates this point. I believe that the basic structure of recognition theory would force us to re-conceptualize his thinking on this issue when we examine it from a 21st century perspective. This means that we must include a great variety of family structures into the theory while at the same time preserving the basic insight that something like a family is the seat of recognition at its most basic level – a recognition based on love. I will eventually further explore this issue in a separate paper.
Love is not just a determinate realization of mutual recognition; it is the inversion and fulfillment of the earlier forms and patterns. The independent self that was earlier defended to the death is now found to be insufficient and is voluntarily pledged to the other. But such self-surrender is not a real loss, because all that is being surrendered is the abstractly independent legal personality as ownership, and the empty independence that is incapable of anything more than irony or ironical pseudorelationships. In love one gains a higher, substantial self (HER, 213-14).

Thus, we see here much of what we saw in the earlier manuscripts – in the love relationship we are taken out of immediacy and we learn what it actually means to be a self because of the mutual recognition of the other. Although it seems that we are giving up independence to be with the other, this independence was always abstract and unfulfilling. It was really an illusion all along since we are so interrelated. As such, the only way to become independent is to build a social foundation, so to speak, and this is best done through love.

What has substantially changed between the later account here and the earlier ones in the unpublished manuscripts is the conception of the transition from the family to civil society. As we saw in the third chapter, Hegel’s earlier conception of the family was situated in a state of nature. As the basic social unity, the family was the first seat of pure recognition in the love relationship and misrecognition when family heads literally dueled to the death over property disputes. That is not the case in the Philosophy of Right. Here the family is thought of as the basic unit if an already established rational state. The
transition between the family and civil society here occurs in the context of the family head, unfortunately always the father for Hegel, taking care of the family’s private interests as a member of civil society, and then in the dissolution of the family when parents die and children move on to form their own families. Hegel writes:

The ethical dissolution of the family consists in the fact that the children are brought up to become free personalities and, when they have come of age, are recognized as legal [rechtliche] persons and as capable both of holding free property of their own and of founding their own families – the sons as heads of families and the daughters as wives (PR, 214, par 177).

Thus, when children reach a certain age, they enter into civil society, recognized by the state as legal adults. Upon entering into civil society their interests stop being directly tangled with the family that brought them up and become their own (eventually becoming shared with the families they will go on to form).

Williams provides a helpful general conception of what civil society is for Hegel. He writes: “Hegel’s term ‘civil society’ refers to the modern recognition of subjective freedom, specifically, the right of subjective freedom to find embodiment in the world of labor and property” (HER, 227). Like Marx after him, Hegel realizes the need and importance of meaningful work. A substantial part of what gives life meaning and purpose is doing work that one can be proud of, work that can not only give a person a livelihood (although this is certainly very important) but allow them to see her or himself as a useful member of society. Honneth was correct to point out that there is a tie between work and recognition, although he did not account for the disparities of power that are
caused by neo-liberal capitalism.\textsuperscript{40} To be recognized for one’s work is to further develop as a subject; it allows one to see oneself as reflected in the work. In the Phenomenology this was taken to such an extreme that it seemed as though recognition simply ended with labor. Furthermore, it is not only important for a person to directly see her or himself in their work, but also for the other to recognize a person’s contributions. The seat for this intersubjective recognition of one’s labor in the Philosophy of Right is to be found in Hegel’s conception of the “corporation,” which is nothing at all like the contemporary understanding of what a corporation is.

For Hegel, the corporation is something that is basically a mix between a medieval guild and modern trade union. He argues:

In the corporation, the family not only has its firm basis in that its livelihood is guaranteed – i.e. it has secure resources – on condition of its [possessing a certain] capability but the two [i.e. livelihood and capability] are also recognized, so that the member of a corporation has no need to demonstrate his competence and his regular income and means of support – i.e. the fact that he is somebody – by any further external evidence. In this way, it is also recognized that he belongs to a whole which is itself as member of society in general, and that he has interest in, and endeavors to promote, the less selfish end of this whole, thus, he has his honour in his estate (PR, 271, par 253).

There are multiple points to be untangled here. For Hegel, civil society is meant to be the place in which the individual pursues her or his private interests and livelihood. As such, civil society is guided by capitalist economic principles (Hegel was very much inspired

\textsuperscript{40} At least not in The Struggle for Recognition. He does take these disparities into account in The I in We.
by Adam Smith here). However, Hegel sees that capitalism left to its own devices will not be sufficient for guaranteeing the economic security of all or for looking out for universal interests and ends. Left to its own devices, capitalist production necessarily creates a surplus labor force, which is in danger of never finding work and thus turning into what Hegel call “the rabble”: the poor who are for one reason or another basically unemployable, and therefore left with no recognition (making them essentially subhuman).

It is for this reason that Hegel introduces the notion of a corporation. Left to the whims of the market, an individual can have neither job security nor any real power to speak up against those who control the most market resources. For example, as an individual lecturer in a university system I have no bargaining power with the administration because I am so easily replaceable. If I am not willing to work for the offered wage, or if I dispute certain policies, there is always someone else who can and will take the job. If all the lecturers in the university were held together as a larger whole through what Hegel calls the corporation, a public dispute must be addressed and resolved if classes are to run. The corporation here will work in this way very much as a trade union would, but it also does other important functions. As a member of a corporation, I am now recognized as a belonging to a larger whole, which means that my accomplishments are recognized in whatever field I belong to, be it a craftsperson, doctor, teacher, or whatever. I am both recognized by my peers in the corporation itself, insofar as I have been granted membership, and by the state as a whole, insofar as the state recognizes a certain corporation as legitimate. Furthermore, if at any point of my life
I cannot work, the corporation will take care of my livelihood.\footnote{All in all, the notion seems like a terrific idea.} “The corporation mediates between civil society’s ethos of universal egoism and exploitation and the ethical state in which all are citizens. The corporation provides its members with a determinant form of recognition, namely, honor” (Williams, HER, 228; emphasis mine).

To be a member of a corporation, then, is to be recognized as an honorable person; and this means that we avoid some of the pitfalls with Honneth’s notion of the recognition of work that were diagnosed in chapter one.

Thus far, what we have seen in the Philosophy of Right are several moments towards greater and more concrete recognition. One logically begins with the most formal recognition of the individual as property owner, which gives us rights of non-interference – “don’t mess with my stuff and I won’t mess with yours.” In order to incorporate positive responsibilities we have towards other, which cannot happen if we only think of recognition on this formal level, we must introduce morality into the picture. This turns out to be too formal as well since it looks to establish universal rules for moral action from what is essentially only a one-sided, subjective standpoint (I universalize the dictum for my action from my perspective). This leads Hegel to introduce content into the equation by looking at the concrete institution of the family, where one is recognized as a subject worthy of love; civil society, where one is recognized for one’s work as a member of a corporation; and, finally, the state. It is to Hegel’s discussion of the state that we must now turn.

The corporation is the mediating institution which connects the private interests if individuals to the universal interests of the state. The state is meant to establish what is good for the whole. In many ways, Hegel’s argument for what the state as such should
look like if it is to be considered rational is the least interesting for our discussion of recognition here.\textsuperscript{42} The sketch of the state that he provides is rooted in a constitutional monarchy with three basic branches: the sovereign, who is the symbolic manifestation of the state as a whole; the legislative power, which is the creator of laws (as the name implies); and the executive power, which is responsible for carrying out the basic functions and tasks of the state. The state is meant to look after the interests of the people as a whole. At its best it is where mutual recognition is finally realized though becoming institutionalized, i.e. gaining actual objective existence, thus allowing individuals to understand themselves both as individuals and as members of a greater whole. It is really only this particular point that I am interested in for the contemporary context, not the organization that Hegel suggests.

When writing about the \textit{real} function of a state, Hegel tells us that:

The state is the actuality of the substantial \textit{will}, an actuality which it possesses in the particular \textit{self-consciousness} when it has been raised to universality; as such it is the \textit{rational} in and for itself. This substantial unity is an absolute and unmoved end it itself, and in it, freedom enters into the highest right, just as the ultimate end possesses the highest right in relation to individuals [\textit{die Einzelnen}], whose \textit{highest duty} is to be members of the state.

If the state is confused with civil society and its determination is equated with the security and protection of property and personal freedom, \textit{the}
interests of individuals [der Einzelnen] as such becomes the ultimate end for which they are united; it also follows from this that membership of the state is an optional matter. – But the relationship of the state to the individual [Individuum] is of quite a different kind. Since the state is objective spirit, it is only through being a member of the state that the individual [Individuum] himself has objectivity, truth, and ethical life (PR, 275-76, par 258).

This lengthy quote sums up Hegel’s overall view of the state. In order for Spirit to move out of itself, to become objective (an actually existing thing in the world, and Idea in the Hegelian sense of the term rather than an abstract concept), it must be externally instantiated. Without a state, Spirit and consciousness are stuck in a kind of infancy; a mere potentiality that has yet to come to fruition or actualization. Spirit becomes actualized in the social context of the state, and consciousness reaches the level of self-consciousness in the life of a particular people that have developed this state.

In the social context of a state, consciousness is now fully aware of its intersubjective nature. I come to understand myself only when others reflect my subjectivity back to me in a complex, multifaceted web of recognition. For example, I cannot be a philosopher if there is not a framework on which I can perform the activity of philosophizing. I need others to first teach me the basics, and then to engage me in developing and honing my ideas, and, finally, when my work is placed under public scrutiny, it is essentially others who reflect back to me that I am indeed doing philosophy (and not, let us say physics, or perhaps just talking nonsense). This serves as the basic blueprint for general cognitive relationships which must also be in place if the subject is
considered to be free. Without a recognition of one’s rights, both positive and negative, and without a recognition of one’s worth as a person through work, the subject cannot be free, according to Hegel. Furthermore, this is nearly an all or nothing game. Either everyone is free/mutually recognized or no one truly is (at least in the fullest sense of the notion). If there is a portion of the population that is misrecognized, be it due to gender, race, ethnicity, etc., then the general recognitive relationships among people will be imbalanced and distorted. If we take a look at gender, if women are being misrecognized because of sexist attitudes among human beings and cemented institutional sexism, then we get a recognitive distortion in general because if men believe that women are somehow inferior, then they will not accept recognition of their subjectivity that is reflected back to them from half of the population (they are not truly accepting recognition from those who are closest to them – partners, mothers, grandmothers). Practically speaking, this will result in all of the gender inequality we are quite well aware of (i.e. pay imbalance, lack of acknowledgement of care work as “real work,” sexual violence, and so on). Men will also have a skewed picture of what it means to be a man, denying aspects of themselves if they are “too feminine,” and the freedom of everyone is thus stifled. Women must act in ways prescribed by society at large or face public humiliation or violence, and men will do the same for different but very much interrelated reasons (we can think here of the hundreds of insults we have for men who fail to be “men” according to our preconceived gender categories).

Moving back to the passage above, consciousness reaches universality in a social context because Hegel’s epistemology and metaphysics are essentially socially-historically mediated. One is not a knower and a being outside of one’s historical and
cultural context simply because there is no way to transcend this context. Part of what it means to reach “Absolute Knowing,” as it has been described in the Phenomenology and Encyclopedia, is to come to this realization – the universal is not a Platonic Form that transcends our lived reality, but rather imbedded in the particular. This particular from the standpoint of the Philosophy of Right will include actual individuals and the institutions they form (although the institutions and state are not reducible to individuals; they occupy a distinct ontological category). Furthermore, as Hegel is pointing out here, the individual will attain actual individuality rather than an abstract one by being a member of the state. This is what grounds who we actually are. Membership in the state is referred to by Hegel as the “highest duty” of individuals, and it is how individuals reach “objectivity, truth, and ethical life.”

This brings us to the final point under consideration; one that I take to be the most problematic for the Philosophy of Right. Hegel reminds us that the concerns of the state are universal concerns. The state is meant to care for the good of the people as a whole. In a specifically anti-liberal move, Hegel is insistent here that the point of the state is not just the protection of individual rights (mainly property rights). This would be the confusion of civil society with the state. I am in complete agreement with Hegel’s assessment that the point of the state is not just to protect rights, which is certainly important, but to actually look after the public good. However, I firmly believe that Hegel is mistaken to think that the state can actually curtail the excesses of capitalism in civil society. As a product of his time, he would not have been able to see what would come to pass in advance capitalist societies. We can most certainly see it though. The story that capitalism tells is one of making it to the top (getting piles of money) through hard work.
This is a powerful story that has repeatedly trumped other narratives. At its craziest, it claims that ultimately it is only the individual good that matters, and that the public good is best served simply by sticking to the civil society narrative that is described by Hegel. This has translated into having the economic apparatus run the state rather than the other way around (the basic claim of libertarianism).

The problem with this story is already diagnosed by Hegel: it is the problem of poverty and the rabble. Capitalism necessarily creates poverty and unemployment, to the point that it is taken as common economic wisdom that an unemployment level of between five to six percent is healthy for the overall economy. As Williams puts it, “Hegel’s vision of civil society is tragic, because the very conditions necessary for the liberation and exercise of individual subjective freedom are at the same time conditions that create conflict, economic insecurity, unemployment, and poverty” (HER, 244–45).

This is essentially the reality that we face in the 21st century, and the reality that we have faced for quite some time. Due to the proliferation of neo-liberal capitalism, this is the reality of most of the world. With some small exceptions of Western European nations that have somewhat curtailed the worst effects of capitalism, it has not been the case that the public good has taken precedence over the private good. This is abundantly clear in the United States where it is still a controversial point to legislate mandatory participation in a capitalist health insurance market (we can for the time being disregard the possibility of public, universal health care).

When such a system is in place mutual recognition relationships are necessarily rendered impossible, for the poor never gain equal recognition. “Since in civil society recognition is bound up with work and property, the poor are in effect denied recognition,
and suffer scorn and rejection” (Williams, HER, 245-46). This problem is only made worse when we add to it the problems of misrecognition due to race and culture; problems that end up being inextricably tied along with problems of poverty. We thus get a systematic problem in the Philosophy of Right as a whole. The rational state is a place of mutual recognition, but mutual recognition is rendered impossible because poverty undermines it. The solution to this problem for Hegel was participation in the corporation, but this has not been the norm in capitalist societies and it seems to me to be a patch up job for a much larger underlying problem. Capitalism itself is the problem, the proverbial elephant in the room, so the solution is not to curtail the excesses of capitalism but to abandon it altogether as an economic paradigm if we want mutual recognition and the freedom for all. I unfortunately have no easy answer as to what will replace it, but I believe that recognition theory dialectically leads us to the conclusion that a different system must be in place if we take mutual recognition seriously.

Conclusion

The combination of the insights found in the Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind and the Philosophy of Right take us through Hegel’s mature reflections on the topic of recognition and provide the grounds for my position about the ontology of recognition, and thus the ontology of the socio-political sphere. As I have already elaborated in the completion of the section on the Encyclopedia, one cannot be a subject or a human being outside of an intersubjective framework, which is gained through the process of recognition, so it is absurd to begin our political reflections and the organization of a state from an atomistic standpoint. It is only possible to be a human being and a political agent
if one is recognizes as one in what amounts to a complex web of recognition. Failures of recognition do damage to the very core of who and what we are. When one is not recognized fully one is not considered fully human, and this leads to damaged relationships all throughout society, as the master/slave dialectic has demonstrated.

The *Philosophy of Right* expands our ontology from the subjective viewpoint theorized in the *Encyclopedia*, which is incomplete in and of itself, by including society as a whole, along with all of its concrete manifestations, into the recognitive framework. This fills in the objective component, and the two together provide us with a complete theory. The existence of rights and morality can only take place in a robust social context among the life-world of a particular people (this is the meaning of ethical life or *Sittlichkeit*). These people reach the level of universality, of finally realizing themselves as fully formed agents, through mutual recognitive relationships. The family recognizes the agent through unconditional love, teaching them who they are and what it means to be a person. In civil society people are recognized for their particularity – for the individual accomplishments they make, whatever those may be. Finally, people realize their full subjectivity as parts of a greater whole that is the state. Here strictly individual interests are abandoned in favor or the public good, but a focus on the public good actually enhances and makes possible the realization of individual interests. This is the standpoint of universality. It is where subjective and objective coincide for Hegel. I emphasize that such a viewpoint is ontological rather than empirical because it speaks of the *necessary* structures of humanity and subjectivity, not merely contingent empirical

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43 I should note here that the dialectic does continue a bit more through people discovering themselves first through art, then religion and philosophy. This ends up being the final culmination of the dialectic, which Hegel elaborates upon briefly at the end of the *Encyclopedia*, and in much greater detail in his published lectures on those three topics. Each set of lectures consists of three volumes.
facts about *homo sapiens*. As we saw back in chapter one, even Honneth ended up falling into such a position when he argued that cognition is a meaningless concept without there being recognition, although he vehemently denied that this is a matter of ontology.

Overall, freedom will be realized only when we can have actual mutually cognitive relationships. We are still a long ways away from such relationships. Racism and sexism continue to plague us, and our very economic structure guarantees misrecognition by building poverty into the heart of our system. While Hegel did not realize his own racism and sexism, his very arguments speak against him. The dialectic has moved in a different direction, showing that his views on women and his philosophy of history are hopelessly outdated. However, he did see the problems that poverty would make for mutual recognition, which he attempted to fix with his development of the notion of a corporation. While I think that this is a sound suggestion, I argue that capitalism will ultimately undermine any such institution, necessarily building misrecognition and a host of other ills into our contemporary existence. Without an alternative economic framework mutual recognition will remain unrealized.
Chapter Five:

Responding to Recognition’s Critics:
Kelly Oliver, Patchen Markell, and Lois McNay

Introduction

No sooner than recognition theory had entered back into political discourse in the early 1990’s, being used to make sense of claims about injustice done regarding issues surrounding identity, that criticisms emerged from various theoretical perspectives. These theoretical perspectives are quite varied. For example, in his book *Bound by Recognition*, Patchen Markell argues that recognition theory is a failure insofar as it reifies identity, making it seem as if subjectivity and claims surrounding identity are more fixed and static than they actually are. He calls this the problem of “sovereignty”; a problem that makes us fall into the trap of thinking that the self is more stable, self-sufficient, and autonomous than it actually is.

Inspired by various post-structuralist thinkers, Kelly Oliver argues that recognition theory is guilty of making violence and antagonism normative. In her book *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, her central claim is that there are various aspects of personhood, various substantial differences among life experience, which make successful recognition impossible and undesirable. Instead, she posits that we are ethically obligated by others to listen to their life story in such a way that we come to the realization that different kinds of suffering and different life-worlds are “beyond recognition”. They can be “witnessed” but never recognized and completely understood.
Finally, a post-modern critique emerges out of the work of Lois Mcnay in her book *Against Recognition*. Her central argument revolves around the notion that recognition theory is not altogether a failure, but that it is unsuccessful in accounting for disputes of power that emerge for a myriad of reasons (for example, disparities due to class, gender, the intersection of the two, race, and so forth). She believes that recognition theory is too “subjectivist,” focusing heavily on the psychological dimensions of identity formation rather than the material conditions that are the source of various inequalities. Power rather than identity claims is more important for seeing oppression and injustice and fighting against it, Mcnay argues.

All three of these critiques share one thing in common: they take recognition theory to be primarily about *identity*, which all three construe as fixed and stable, and then criticize recognition theory for claiming that identity works in this manner. As such, my task in this chapter will be to outline each of the different criticisms and respond to them in turn, showing that identity constituted through recognition does not in fact operate in the manner they describe. As a matter of fact, Honeeth’s empirical findings directly speak against this notion of identity. Furthermore, each of the different thinkers here ignores most of the central insights of recognition theory as they are developed by Fichte and Hegel, making their criticisms rather one-sided. They all focus on the identity claims that are central to Honneth and Taylor, ignoring the claims about the constitution of subjectivity that are emphasized by Fichte and Hegel. Thus, the second task here is to show, as I have been arguing all along, that identity claims are secondary to the overall recognitive ontology which centers on the structure and constitution of subjectivity. The criticism put forward by Markell, Oliver, and Mcnay can be answered or integrated into
the overall recogntive framework if we take this step back, which is precisely what I will do here.

Patchen Markell’s *Bound by Recognition*

I will begin my analysis by focusing on the work of Patchen Markell, who is the only one that directly focuses on the Hegelian account of recognition rather than focusing solely on the 20th century iterations of the theory. He begins by stating the importance of recognition theory and the focus that recognition is given in political encounters surrounding race and ethnicity in the late 20th and early 21st century. However, he is highly mistrustful that recognition can actually redress basic claims of injustice. Markell tells us that:

I shall argue that the ideal of mutual recognition, while appealing, is also impossible, even incoherent; and that in pursuing it we misunderstand certain crucial conditions of social and political life. Foremost among these conditions is the fact of human finitude, which I interpret not in terms of mortality, but rather in terms of the practical limits imposed upon us by the openness and unpredictability of the future (*BBR*, 4-5).

The notion of “mutual recognition” that Markell is relying upon here is substantially different from the one that we have encountered thus far in Hegel. For Markell, to mutually recognize someone is to see them for *who they really are*; to realize and to reflect back to the person their authentic identity. As such, this is an impossible task. In light of human finitude, there is no stable, fixed identity which we can recognize. Identity shifts due to the unpredictability of the future.
It should be pointed out at the outset of our discussion that this is not the notion of mutual recognition that has been developed here. Mutual recognition for Hegel occurs when consciousness, the mere intentional consciousness which is yet to be realized at the level of self-consciousness (thus certainly not having anything remotely resembling a fixed identity), is reflected back and forth among a minimum of two beings. I am mutually recognized not when my identity is reflected back to me, but when my subjectivity is reflected back to me – when the other says “you are the same kind of thing as me, different from an object and thus free.” This primordial, idealized encounter between self and other is in some way reiterated every time people encounter one another. Hence the feeling of pain of being ignored in a social encounter or conversation, for this resembles misrecognition at the primordial level.

While Markell might want to extend his critique to the level of subjectivity as it is understood here, he never in fact does so (and I believe that the notion that I outline above can and will be defended against his attacks). Because he sees recognition as the sort of process which attempts to fix human beings to a certain kind of thing that has an essential identity, he wants to move away from the general recognitive model. He proposes the replacement of the recognitive model with what he calls “the politics of acknowledgement.” Markell argues that “in this picture, democratic justice does not require that all people be known and respected as who they really are. It requires, instead, that no one be reduced to any characterization of his or her identity for the sake of someone else’s achievement of a sense of sovereignty or invulnerability, regardless of whether that characterization is negative of positive, hateful or friendly” (BBR, 7). In order to understand this remark we have to flesh out what Markell means by
“sovereignty,” as this is the central theme which characterizes much of his dissatisfaction with the politics of recognition.

Markell contends that recognition theory fails to recognize that it is devoted to the notion of sovereignty (BBR, 10). Sovereignty, according to Markell, “refers to the condition of being an independent self-determining agent, characterized by what Hannah Arendt calls ‘uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership’” (BBR, 11). That is, to be a sovereign agent, similar to being a sovereign state, means that one is not reliant on others. It means that one is the master of oneself; a wholly independent being. The problem with this notion is that it simply is not the case that anyone is an independent agent in this manner. We are reliant on each other for practically everything: care when we are young or ill, emotional support, sustenance, and really every conceivable aspect of our existence. When we think of ourselves as independent individuals who do not need others we are mistaken about what it means to be human. To be human is to be vulnerable and necessarily interdependent, not sovereign (Markell questions whether even states can make any reasonable claim to sovereignty).

The narrative that Markell develops all throughout Bound by Recognition is that demands for recognition all boil down to others recognizing who we really are. Who we really are is an essential feature of what makes one person different (or similar) to another, and when my identity is recognized the other says “I see who you really are, respect your claims and your mastery or yourself (i.e. your independence).” Thus, the demand for recognition is a demand for sovereignty. For Markell, the two concepts are inextricably connected. Justice and injustice, then, are not to be understood in light of recognition since recognition is so bound up with sovereignty. Markell writes: “on the
account I develop here, the root of injustice in relations of identity and difference is not
identity as such but rather the effort to make identity – the as-yet-unfinished and
unpredictable story of one’s life – into the ground of an impossible sovereignty over
one’s own future” (BBR, 23-24). Thus, we see here that identity cannot be thought of as
fixed and stable, but as uncertain, incomplete, and ultimately contingent upon
circumstances outside our control. So incomplete, as a matter of fact, that no one of us is
the master of our own story. Even after death our story and identity changes depending
on how others tell it.

Relying on Arendt, Makell further argues that “rather than treating identities as
antecedent facts about people that govern their action, Arendt conceives of identities as
the results of action and speech in public, through which people appear to others and
thereby disclose who they are” (BBR, 13). This notion of identity as a result of action is
connected to the notion of “acknowledgement” that Markell develops as an alternative to
recognition. He tells us that:

What’s acknowledged in the act of acknowledgement is not one’s identity
– at least not as the politics of recognition conceives identity: a coherent
self-description that can serve as the ground of agency, guiding or
determining what we do. Rather, acknowledgement is directed at the basic
condition of one’s existence and activity, including, crucially, the limits of
“identity” as the ground of action, limits which arise out of our
constitutive vulnerability to the unpredictable reactions and responses of
others (BBR, 35-36).
A basic feature of existentialism is that what makes us human is our projection of projects into the future. As we do this, we encounter others along the way, and we simply do not know how others will respond to us or our projects. By definition, there is an uncertainty and unpredictability built into all our actions. No matter how well we plan contingency cannot be removed from life. Thus, to acknowledge this means that we embrace unpredictability and we deal with the fact that identity emerges out this unpredictability rather than thinking of identity as a preset, coherent property that we always-already possess.

Markell justifies his above-stated views by a reading of Greek tragedy and a reconceptualization of the master/slave dialectic in Hegel. His reading of Greek tragedy focuses on the way in which clashes between agents often result in completely unforeseen consequences; consequences that don’t end well for any of the actors (BBR, 63). Since Greek tragedy is well outside my field of expertise, I will take Markell at his word on his interpretations. More relevant for our concern here is his reading of Hegel. The interpretive move that Markell makes regarding the Phenomenology of Spirit is to argue that rather than looking at the text as an inspiration for the politics of recognition we should instead read it as a critique of the notion of recognition. Markell writes:

While it is true that action always emerges our of an enabling background of relations of recognition that have made us who we are, Hegel, is his diagnostic voice, echoes the tragic insight that action forever outruns the relations of recognition out of which it emerges, and that recognition is therefore inevitably belated: it cannot insulate us against the surprises and
reversals of action, in which we lose ourselves, sometimes pleasantly, 
sometimes catastrophically (BBR, 94).

Under this kind of reading, recognition is essentially transformed into acknowledgement. What we recognize is not the identity of the other, who the other truly is while they simultaneously do the same for us, but rather the fragility of all of our interactions.

Markell justifies this reading of Hegel with a somewhat alternative take on the master/slave dialectic. The beginning step is very much the standard interpretation: when the master realizes that recognition is impossible if the other is killed, he or she enslaves the other. However, the reason for the enslavement, according to Markell, is to hide from him or herself the very interdependence that makes us human. The master makes a pretense at independence by shifting the entire burden of labor to the slave. Markell states: “the master-slave relation thus accommodates the contradiction between dependence and independence by spreading it over social space, making one person bear the disproportionate weight of human dependence on the material world so that another person, equally disproportionately, can experience the pleasures of nature without suffering the burden of labor” (BBR, 111). This move on behalf of the master is of course unjustified. It achieves the opposite of what it initially sought to do insofar as the master is in fact entirely dependent upon the slave. Markell argues that to move out of this contradiction is not to shift to a notion of mutual recognition but instead for both master and slave to realize that acting in the world is always based around interacting with one another, and that any and all interactions presuppose both dependence and uncertainty (this is the move toward acknowledgement) (BBR, 119-120).
There is merit to much of what Markell writes. I believe that he is correct to say that our quest for sovereignty necessarily ends in failure due to the contingencies of human interaction. I also believe that his critique of identity politics is basically correct. If we think of identity as a preset fixed thing, a static essence if you will, and thus something that the other either reflects back to me or refuses to reflect back to me, then we are bound to reify differences and to forget the interdependent nature of human existence. However, I think that Markell has misunderstood the primary ontological grounding for recognition theory by focusing his critique on the notion of identity, thus essentially missing what the heart of the theory is really about: the co-constitution of self-consciousness by merely conscious beings (that is, the structure of human subjectivity as such). He makes this mistake insofar as he reduces all recognitive interaction to struggles over identity. Furthermore, I think that he is unfairly attributing a flat-footed notion of identity to recognition theory as a whole. As he himself argues, identity is the result of interdependent interactions among disparate agents. It develops through complicated processes of recognition that begin at birth, which means that it by definition cannot be a preset given or essential quality that we possess in the way that I possess a material good. These difficulties in Markell’s argument are there because theorists such as Taylor and Honneth don’t always make these distinctions clear, and they are also due to a limited reading of the Phenomenology.

Concerning the status of the master and slave in the Phenomenology, Markell’s reading is limited in at least two ways. First of all, he simply dismisses the notion of pure recognition immediately preceding the discussion of master and slave where Hegel outlines how each person reflects the subjectivity of the other, as well as the objectivity of
the other insofar as the other is a body in the world, and lets the other go. While stating
that Hegel does try to reconcile mutual recognition with the power imbalance in the
master/slave dialectic, Markell ignores this opening move and insists that Hegel never
reconciles the two notions. Part of the problem here lies in the fact that this reading also
ignores Hegel’s later work and the closing sections of the *Phenomenology* where
recognition reaches its completion in self-consciousness being elevated to the level of
*Geist* through forgiveness. Markell is far from the only scholar to make this mistake. As
we have repeatedly seen throughout the last few chapters, this is a common misreading of
Hegelian recognition theory.

The second, and I believe even more grievous error, is Markell’s reading of the
master/slave dialectic as a fight over *identity*. He argues that the master/slave dialectic is
problematic because “it leads us to think of ‘recognition’ as a kind of cognitive act that,
first and foremost, has the *other* as its object. If the master ‘gets all the recognition,’
means that the master is the recipient of the slave’s recognition, and that the slave’s
recognition is all about the master and focused on his *identity* – in this case his identity
*qua* independent, sovereign being” (*BBR*, 106). This sort of reading of what is at stake
here is deeply problematic. The most glaring difficulty is the notion that recognition here
is understood as a purely *cognitive* act. This glosses over both the order of presentation as
well as the logical order of the *Phenomenology*. At the moment of the master/slave
dialectic consciousness is still stuck at a pre-reflective level; true cognition still eludes it.
It does not understand itself as a subject or as a full self-consciousness. This happens
much later at the intersubjective, socio-historical level.
To be cognizant of something means to be aware of it at a fairly sophisticated level. It means that one has reached an understanding of something. For example, if one goes through therapy and comes to the realization that her or his relationships are not working out because of unhealthy interactions with one’s parents during the crucial stages of development, one becomes cognizant of that which was lurking around subconsciously at an undeveloped, not quite cognizant level. At the moment of the master/slave dialectic consciousness is still trying to understand itself, to come to terms with the kind of entity that it is. To say that the act of recognition is a cognition of the other and the other’s identity at this stage of development is simply a mistake. Rather, recognition is the means through which consciousness is able to develop and thus reach the point of cognition. As we saw with Honneth’s discussion in *Reification* back in chapter one, the recognition that the child gains from the caretaker during the time of infancy and development is precognitive. The child learns to understand her or himself as an independent subject by being recognized as such by the caretaker, who imparts on the child a language, culture, history, and so forth. Thus, they can only get to the level of being able to cognize only through first being recognized. Furthermore, the act of recognition is never fully directed either at the other or the self. It is by necessity an interplay between self and other where both parties are simultaneously self and other. Even though it seems as though the master has gained recognition from the slave, that is, that the act of recognition is entirely other directed, the phenomenological observer knows that this is not the case. The master has no real recognition here since she or he will not acknowledge the slave and needs to do so in order to gain the slave’s recognition.
Markell’s claim that the slave is recognizing the identity of the master qua sovereign being is equally problematic. This notion imparts the critique of identity politics onto a text that isn’t really concerned with the notion of identity. One’s identity is shaped through complex forces of culture, economics, geographic location, historical situation, and so forth. At a descriptive level, to say that the slave recognizes the identity of the master is simply a misuse of the term “identity”. Identity will come about at the endpoint of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; it is the point at which Spirit or Geist comes to the self-awareness as a socio-historical being. At the moment of the master/slave dialectic it is not even remotely close to this realization. This manner of interpreting the *Phenomenology*, or any of Hegel’s work, is a recurring problem insofar as it treats one element of the work as a self-contained whole. When this happens, the overall thread of the argument is inevitably lost; leading in this case to a misreading of what Hegelian recognition is all about.

This leads us to the final point to be considered here: Markell’s discussion of the nature of identity. For reasons that remain unclear, Markell argues that recognition theory treats identity as a preset given, an essential quality of a person or group of people that is either recognized or not. This simply cannot be the case is we follow the inherent logic of recognitive theory. Identity is not something that one possesses like a material object or DNA. Rather, it is intersubjectively developed from birth forward by our interactions with family and the people in our immediate community, and the overall identity of a people is recognitively developed in their interactions both among themselves and other cultures. Identity is not an essential property but an ongoing, unfolding process. How I see myself at this moment of time, for example, depends on a complex interplay of how I
am viewed by others, what they reflect back to me based on my birth culture, my subsequent move to the United States, my work and my general interests, and the way that I have interiorized all of this such that I project it outwards with my actions. At no point do I ever have a complete, fixed identity (and at no point is it the case that I can just pick up any identity I please). The moment that one tires to fix identity in this manner is precisely where recognition fails and injustice happens. This is when we completely reduce others to their race, gender, or sexual orientation, and this sort of reduction is inevitably pernicious.  

It can therefore be said that if recognition theorists are in fact arguing that identity is understood, formed, and recognized in the way that Markell describes, then we do indeed have a rather serious problem. I think that he is absolutely correct that the notion of the sovereign self is a political disaster. It is a myth of the most pernicious sort. However, I do not think that there is anything in recognition theory as I have outlined it thus far which would suggest a static model of identity. Identity is the intersubjectively navigated end product of a complex interplay of recognition. It simply cannot be some kind of given. Recognition is the manner in which identity is developed, and continuously develops throughout life, whether for good or ill depending on the kind of recognitive relationships we have. We don’t first have identity and then recognize it afterwards; we get identity through ongoing recognitive processes, and the identity we get is necessarily

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44 I think that Sartre’s discussion of bad faith in Being and Nothingness is helpful for illustrating this point from a somewhat different angle. For Sartre, bad faith happens when consciousness, which he conceives as the pure intentionality that is no particular thing, tries to either make itself or another consciousness into a fixed object. However, I should note that Sartre takes this a bit too far in his early work since he argues that consciousness has a radical freedom to choose to intend anything it wants to, thus underplaying the importance of one’s socio-historical position. I don’t think that he repeats this same mistake in his later work.
fluid and subject to change (although not completely fluid, of course, since we cannot
escape our socio-historical circumstances).

**Kelly Oliver’s *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition***

Markell’s view of how recognition theory regards identity is also put forward by
other critics of the theory. In Kelly Oliver’s case, the criticism is developed through a
post-structuralist lens. The main distinction in her criticism, however, is that she is
concerned that the recognition of a given identity often, even necessarily, results in the
perpetuation of unjust power differentials and of the washing away of crucial *differences*
between people. The other, when recognized, is not recognized for his or her otherness
but for his or her sameness. Oliver would thus like to move past recognition theory in
order to be able to allow differences to thrive. She writes: “the tension between
recognizing the familiar in order to confirm what we already know and listening for the
unfamiliar that disrupts what we already know is at the heart of contemporary theories of
recognition” (*WBR*, 2). She would like to move “beyond recognition” because she
believes that there are certain facets of human experience and existence that can never be
fully recognized by others.

Oliver tells us that her project “is to begin developing a theory of subjectivity by
starting from the position of those othered” (*WBR*, 6-7). These othered are the victims of
oppression in its varied manifestations: victims of racism, slavery, sexual violence,
cultural violence, ethnic cleansing, and so forth. She thinks that all too often when people
try to make sense of the experiences of the oppressed, they connect these experiences
back to things that have happened in their own lives, but this washes away what is truly
horrific in oppression. The suffering of the other cannot be so easily assimilated, and, more importantly, there are strong ethical reasons not to try assimilating this suffering because to do so is to fail to see its horrors. Instead, those who suffer must speak for themselves. Thus, Oliver wants to move us beyond recognition and toward a notion she calls “witnessing.” For Oliver witnessing involves two components that are paradoxically related: “it is important to note that witnessing has both the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen, in other words, bearing witness” (*WBR*, 16). What we see here is that one can witness in the usual sense of the term, as in the case of an eyewitness account, where the person has literally seen what has occurred and is speaking about it. We also see in this definition the other sense of the term, the one employed less often, where to witness is to speak about what one has directly experienced that cannot be seen or even understood by the other due to the private nature of the experience. Using the language of recognition to explain this second conception of witnessing, Oliver states: “to recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences are real even though they may be incomprehensible to us; this means that we must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us” (*WBR*, 106).

The second aspect of witnessing consists of the notions of “address-ability” and “response-ability”. These two ethical concepts perform the normative work of the project Oliver proposes. The other must be willing to listen to the testimony of a person who has suffered extreme forms of oppression in such a way that subjectivity can be restored. This listening takes into account the fact that the experience of the other cannot and should not be assimilated into one’s own experience, as we have already seen above. To assimilate is
to damage the already frail subjectivity of the other because “extreme forms of
subordination destroy the witness necessary for subjectivity” (Oliver, *WBR*, 85); and
because “the inner witness is the necessary structure of address-ability and response-ability inherent in subjectivity” (Oliver, *WBR*, 87). The “inner witness” is the aspect of
the self that is created through one’s socio-historical position (what Oliver refers to as
one’s “subject position”) and through how well others are able to address and respond to
that which one has witnessed. The address and response could simply be to attentively
listen to the story of the other in a loving or caring way. One has the ethical obligation to
take up this task.

Other than arguing that there are elements of life that cannot and should not be
recognized for fear of washing away differences, Oliver makes the further critique that
recognition in general, and especially as it is developed in Hegel, makes struggle and
violence a normative facet of subjectivity and political life. This reading of recognition is
grounded through an exclusive focus on the master/slave dialectic in the
*Phenomenology.* 45 According to Oliver, “in the Hegelian scenario the hope for mutual
recognition and equality is won through enslavement and domination. Within Hegelian
mutual recognition both self-consciousnesses must be the same; difference is threatening
otherness that alienates and motivates the murderous urges inherent in the struggle for
recognition” (*WBR*, 39). The basic thrust of this reading of Hegel is found in Oliver’s
general critique of recognitive theory as a whole. For her, recognition is always
recognition of that which is familiar and safe – that which we already possess within us.
Mutual recognition, then, is not about recognizing how the other is different from the self

45 This is not particularly unusual given her grounding in French post-structuralism, which tends to read
Hegel almost exclusively through the lens of Kojève. We have already seen the problems with Kojève’s
reading of Hegel in our discussion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit.*
and how we can allow the other to peacefully coexist with us, but rather about how we can assimilate the other. The assimilation, according to Oliver, happens through violence and oppression (the enslavement in the master/slave dialectic).

This reading of Hegel (along with similar readings of recognition as it is found in Taylor and Honneth) leads Oliver to posit that the need for recognition only occurs in the context of grave oppression and that it is in fact as symptom of oppression:

“dehumanization creates the desire and need for recognition from the dominant culture. By so doing, however, the desire for recognition reinforces the dominance of the oppressor and the subordination of the oppressed. For it is the dominant culture and its representatives who have the power to confer and withhold recognition” (WBR, 26).

What Oliver suggests here is that recognition is in no way a cure for oppression and injustice; it is rather a symptom of this underlying disease. Thus, when injustice is operative it cannot be the case that it will be rectified through proper recognitive relationships because these are necessarily one-sided. The oppressed need recognition from the oppressor, but the oppressor holds all the cards. They choose whether or not to give recognition and this entails that more often than not they will ignore the plea of the oppressed, or so Oliver argues. According to her, what occurs in situations where recognition is desired is that the oppressed feel the overwhelming need to gain recognition from an oppressor who is responsible for their dehumanization. She tells us that, “it is only after the oppressed are dehumanized that they seek acknowledgement or recognition of their humanity. More perverse is that they seek recognition of their humanity from the very group that has denied them of it in the first place” (WBR, 26).
The underlying view of recognition that is at work here is that the need or desire for recognition is not the basic human need that structures our subjectivity and humanity, as I have argued all along here, but rather the aftermath of a subjectivity and humanity that has been denied. Thus, the logical order of Oliver’s argument is such that we first have human beings, and that these human beings have developed various characteristics and identities (the manner of how this is done is irrelevant in this discussion), such that recognition only becomes a necessity only when these identities have come under attack. In the example of racial oppression that she is drawing upon, black people have felt the need for recognition only after the establishment of the black/white binary that characterized them as not fully human in some manner. It follows from this argument that in this particular binary white people do have the need for recognition, since it is only the oppressed who feel this need because of their dehumanization at the hands of the oppressor. Furthermore, even if white people grant this recognition, it will always be on their terms since they are the only ones who are truly capable of granting it. For this reason, as well as the other reasons explained above, she wants to move political thought away from recognition and toward witnessing.

There are two problems with Oliver’s conception of recognition. One of the problems is that she simply misreads the technical aspects of how recognition functions, especially so when she argues that there is a top-down flow of recognition from oppressor to oppressed. The second problem with her reading is one that is connected to the first: it is what I would call a reification of difference. That is, by focusing exclusively on the subjectivity from the standpoint of the other, Oliver overstates differences between self and other in such a way that she essentially repeats the same mistake she accuses
recognition theory of making (favoring sameness) from the opposite angle. “Sameness” and “difference” are concepts that are interrelated to such an extent that any attempt to stake one’s theoretical claims in one or the other without working through their essential relation, the way that they co-constitute each other, is bound to raise significant difficulties. I am only capable of characterizing something as different from something else, as an other, only when there is a basis of comparison between the two things. For example, a fiction book can be distinguished from a non-fiction book only on the basis that the two have a binding similarity (insofar as they are both books), and because we have pre-established categories of what constitutes fiction and non-fiction. Thus, if there was such a culture that never wrote any works of fiction, there would be no way to say that there is a distinction to be drawn between fiction and non-fiction. We likewise couldn’t establish similarity or sameness if there was no distinguishing features, no otherness and difference, in the world. If all was truly the same, then we would simply have Parmenidean oneness.

The critique that Oliver makes against recognition theory, even if we restrict ourselves exclusively to the master/slave dialectic, misses an essential component of recognition. She argues that the way recognition theory functions is through a top-down approach. In the master/slave scenario, the master is the one who controls all the recognition since the slave gets no real recognition from the master. This, however, is simply not how the dialectic functions. Recognition works only through the interplay between the self and the other. The master withholding recognition from the slave because they don’t see the slave as worthy of being recognized, but, and this is a most significant but, because the master doesn’t see the slave as worthy she or he gets no real recognition
at all. Mutual recognition can only happen among equals, and the master does not see the slave as an equal. Likewise, the slave recognizes through her or his work that the master is not in fact worthy of recognition because the master is idle. There is only misrecognition until both come to the realization that equality of power and status is necessary for mutual recognition, and thus necessary to achieve self-consciousness. As we have seen in the Encyclopedia Philosophy of Mind, only when both self and other come this realization do they move toward real freedom.

If we take this model to the level of the binary of black/white racism, the same principle still holds. Oliver seems to think that whites have all the recognition and that they are bestowing recognition on black people as they see fit. While it is undoubtedly true that there is a significant power imbalance between the two because of the last half millennium of colonization, slavery, and exploitation, the recognize situation is actually much more complex. The black/white binary makes for mutual misrecognition. Racism guarantees that he beneficiary of white privilege actually does not understand her or himself because they tend to think of themselves as colorless, and they will in fact not have any meaningful recognition until they come to grips with their own history. In a world where race still has so much traction, to be fully recognized as a human being the white person must come to terms with the fact of their whiteness, which came about through a complex socio-historical process. Blackness is reified and made hyper-visible, but whiteness is largely left unstated since it is considered to be the norm (notice the way that we do not mention a person’s race in everyday conversation unless they are not white). Thus, it is simply not the case that white people hold all the recognition as if it is some sort of material resource. They do not dish it out as they see fit. Rather, their
subjectivity has been recognitively shaped through the encounter with the other (the black other in this particular binary), and this encounter has distorted everyone’s sense of who they are.

I would like to reiterate here that the result of this misrecognition has been disastrous on the side of those oppressed, but everyone has been left misrecognized in the end. Recognition is a complex process of reflecting and building one’s subjectivity through the interplay of countless selves and others; it is not the exchange of goods in some sort of barter scenario. It isn’t a quantitative thing, as Oliver seems to imply, where the oppressor has 50 points of recognition and the oppressed has 7 and is trying to get more. Recognition is always-already in play because it functions at the most basic levels of subjectivity as that which makes subjectivity possible in the first place, so it does not make much sense to say that one side has more of it and is not willing to give it up. We should instead think of it in qualitative terms. The recognition that the oppressed gets from the oppressor is bad, distorted, ugly, and all of this is reflected right back at the oppressor. That means that no one is truly recognized and free until everyone mutually comes to this realization and fights to make it happen.

I believe that Oliver is pushed into the reading of recognition she puts forward because of the overall focus on difference that is a part of post-structuralism. All throughout Witnessing she repeatedly states that she wants to begin with the subjectivity of the other in order to be able to preserve difference. While I share Oliver’s concern that human beings tend to either want to assimilate or destroy that which is different, I do not agree with her that this entails moving past recognition or that there are things that are in principle unrecognizable. I think that the very structure of her argument actually
guarantees that we do not move past recognition but are rather always embedded in recognition relationships. To say that I cannot know the suffering of the other, especially the extremely oppressed other, is on the one hand trivially true insofar as I have not shared his or her experience, but on the other hand the statement is also misleading. It is misleading because the very utterance of the sentence “I can’t even imagine what you have been through” shows that I have recognized the difference of the other. Through eyewitness testimony, historical documents, film, literature, music, and so forth, I can come to understand the suffering of the other without having experienced it. To “understand” does not mean to completely appropriate something into one’s experience. For example, through historical study I can come to an understanding of the life of the ancient Greeks or Romans, including their ideas and background assumptions, without ever having experienced life in ancient Greece or Rome (which would of course be impossible). In a similar way, when I tell someone that I understand what they are going through, I certainly do not mean that I too am going through it. It simply means that I have reached some intellectual appreciation of what is happening to them. This sort of understanding knows when to shut up and simply listen to what the other has to say without trying to relate. If we could not even begin to fathom the experience of extreme oppression, if it is completely beyond us as Oliver argues, then it would be utterly and completely alien. One would not even be able to realize what they are listening to or what they are seeing.

This is essentially what I mean when stating that Oliver reifies difference. If we start with difference alone then we never even write a word or think through anything
other than that which is in front of our nose.\textsuperscript{46} However, sameness and difference are not diametrically opposed concepts. They are essentially codependent. I can tell that one thing is different from another only when there is a basis of comparison (when there is sameness there). Likewise, I can say that two things are the same or similar in light of having the concept of difference in mind. Hegel is correct in arguing that if two things are \textit{completely} the same, if there were no distinguishing features whatsoever, then the duality itself would disappear – it would all just be sameness or oneness.\textsuperscript{47} If this was the case, though, there would be no way to articulate it since reality would be all just one thing with no differences. To make this same point at a more concrete level, I can make racial and cultural distinctions among human beings only because we share “humanity” as a universal connecting us. It would be absurd for me to make the same distinctions between myself and a cat because we don’t share basic human features (I could of course make distinctions and similarities based on other shared criteria). Thus, it makes no sense to say that we ought to begin with difference instead of sameness, or vice-versa, or to begin with self instead of the other, because these terms are nonsensical in isolation of each other. I can only be a self in light of an interplay and encounter with the other, and I can only claim difference in light of shared characteristics. “Pure” difference would be so alien that it could neither be recognized nor witnessed (or seen in any way no matter which term we choose to use).

\textsuperscript{46} I think here of the theologians who argue that there is nothing that the human being can know or think about God because God is beyond all human categories. The only appropriate response is reverent silence. However, it seems to me that even if something like this was the case theologically and philosophically there is a world of difference between saying this about God and saying that the same is the case for human beings. At the very least human beings share basic characteristics even when they come from very different places.\textsuperscript{47} Leibniz and Spinoza make the same point.
To be fair to Oliver, she does not quite go this far. She writes: “if we are selves, subjects, and have subjectivity and agency by virtue of our dialogical relations to others, then we are not opposed to others. We are by virtue of others” (WBR, 18). As we have seen through everything that I have argued so far, this statement actually places Oliver squarely within the cognitive framework and not outside of it. She believes that recognition is a matter of violence, of assimilation or destruction of difference, but this is simply a misreading of how the theory functions. You can only have a self in light of the encounter with the other. If the relation is one of violence and opposition to otherness or difference then all we have is misrecognition. Mutual recognition occurs only when the self allows the other, allows that which is different from it (and yet similar at the same time), to be. It happens when both consciousnesses come to the realization that they are codependent upon one another for their subjectivity and their freedom. As Oliver herself states, “we are by virtue of others” (WBR, 18).

Lois McNay’s Against Recognition

In her book Against Recognition, Lois McNay argues that the difficulty with recognition theory lies in the fact that it has not developed an adequate account of power relations. Similarly to Markell (and Oliver to a certain extent), McNay believes that much of recognition theory boils down to identity claims, which, she argues, cannot account for the unequal power relations that are embedded in things such as class inequality due to resource misdistribution. McNay writes:

The normative ‘redemptive’ force residing in the ideal of mutual recognition constrains the way it is used as an analytical tool to explain
how power creates unequal identities. In order to render recognition plausible as an ideal of self-realization and equality, sociological barriers to its possible implementation must necessarily be diminished or construed as contingent, secondary effects of power. Thus problematic aspects of the reproduction of subjectivity that pertain to the pervasive and insidious nature of social domination are underplayed (AR, 8).

And

The idea of a struggle for recognition permits that each thinker set up a primal dyad as the origin of social relations and to attribute to this dyad a fundamental function, whether it be communication, self-expression or a constitutive need for acknowledgement. Social relations are then assessed according to the extent to which they realize or distort this primal function. On this view, social relations of power are always a post hoc effect, distorting or otherwise, of some antecedent and primordial interpersonal dynamic (AR, 8-9).

These two quotes summarize the overall critique that McNay develops throughout Against Recognition.

The basic strand of the argument that we see above is that the various recognition theorists set up a duality between self and other to explain the initial formation of the social. Self and other come to the realization of themselves as subjects through this initial interaction. Self and other also develop their identities through this interaction, and injustice is seen as a reflection of whether or not one’s identity is acknowledged. The problem with all of this, according to McNay, is that in this initial encounter between self
and other power inequality (or equality) is never mentioned. Power is tacked on after the fact but a proper theory of power is never developed by any of the recognition theorists. The main problem with this picture of social development is that power plays a central role in identity formation. It is not something to be added to one’s theorizing after identity and subjectivity have been accounted for. Rather, it is constitutive of the very structure of identity and subjectivity. McNay derives her notion of power from Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological notion of “habitus.” According to McNay, “habitus denotes a process through which power relations are incorporated into the body in the form of durable physical and psychological predispositions” (AR, 12). This is envisioned to be a materialist account of power, where the effects of power relationships almost literally shape the very physical makeup of the subject. This physical makeup would include bodily comportment (we can think here of the different way that men and women dress and behave in public due to unequal power relations), and it also includes the way that the psyche is structured due to our interactions with each other in the world.

McNay doesn’t want to reduce her notion of power just to claims surrounding identity, however. She believes that one must add the notion of agency into the picture, and this is to be understood in a multifaceted way such that it includes class, race, gender, and, most importantly, power (AR, 196). She tells us that “one of the problems of the limited conception of power that is deployed by thinkers in their work on recognition is that the idea of agency is often yoked too closely to unified ideas of identity” (AR, 162). Taking a cue from Markell, McNay argues that identity is not unified and stable in the way that it is conceived by Honneth and Taylor; it is the result of action and of power relations. She thus argues that the recognition theorists’
Tendency to understand social relations as extrapolations from a foundational dyad of recognition results in a reductive account of subject formation in relation to inequalities of power. The most problematic of these reductions is that the concept of recognition tends to bind an account of social action too tightly to the idea of identity...It presumes that agency derives its shape from identity rather than action itself being constitutive of identity (AR, 164; emphasis mine).

This reading of recognition states that the different theorists tend to assume that the impetus for action and the desire for social change comes from different conflicts surrounding identity. For example, one strongly affiliates with one’s gender, let us say as a transgender woman, and chooses to act based around this identity in light of injustices perpetuated against one’s gender (we could substitute any number of different identities and the example would function in roughly the same manner). According to McNay, the problem with this notion is that the logical order is actually opposite of what is stated here. One does not start with an identity and act on it – one gets an identity from acting in different ways in the world, and this identity is primarily shaped through power structures.

I believe that McNay’s attack on recognition comes from a fundamentally flawed way of viewing the theory.48 If we begin our theory at the developmental level, as Honneth does, then recognition is the mechanism by which identity is achieved. At birth it cannot be the case that I have any preset identity. My understanding of who or what I am is contingent upon the way that others recognize me, and I them, based on my socio-

48 We saw the same problem in Markell and Oliver’s account of the way that recognition views identity, albeit from different angles. Nonetheless, I think that it is essential to attack this criticism yet again since it recurs again and again
historical position in the world. Depending on where and when one is born, certain aspects of identity will be played up. My experience as an Eastern European living during the wars in the Balkans in the early 1990’s was shaped by an overemphasis on cultural and religious differences, for example. If I had grown up in the American South during the 1950’s, then race would have factored much more heavily into the equation (I had little to no concept of race until my move to the United States).

The basic point that I want to emphasize is that identity is not and cannot be a preset given. It is developed through complex interactions with others and it changes depending on people’s responses to my actions and my appropriation of these responses. Identity also changes depending on where (and when) one is in the world. Furthermore, as Hegel points out in the *Philosophy of Right*, it is simply not the case that identity comes before action or that it is the ground of action. Words, promises, an appeal to one’s true character, and so forth, are meaningless unless they are backed up by actions. Only actions are to be judged as intentions are meaningless. While Hegel uses this to argue against the empty moralities of feeling and deontology, I think that the same basic sentiment applies here as well. I don’t have an identity and then act upon or because of it – I get an identity by acting and others reflect this back to me by their own actions. I should however point out that at a certain point of one’s life one’s identity becomes fairly well developed. Once this happens then it is in fact the case that social action is tied to identity. The struggles over gender, race, and class inequality that motivate people to protest, fight, and become otherwise politically involved all have the common feature of being disputes over the devaluation of certain identities.
This brings us to McNay’s accusation that recognition theory does not pay attention to power. This attack stems from ignoring the roots of the theory. As we have seen in chapter two, Fichte was already concerned with issues of power and powerlessness when writing the *Foundations of Natural Right*. One establishes rights through the process of recognition because without them humans are caught up in infinite power conflicts. For Fichte, rights are constitutive of subjectivity, but they are also necessary for avoiding the war of all against all (to borrow the Hobbesian formulation). Hegel likewise places power at the center of recognition theory by starting with the master/slave dialectic. The struggle there is essentially a power struggle. The master holds the power of death over the slave, who ends up holding the power of labor, and thus life, over the master. This power imbalance immediately leads to a stilted subjectivity, and for this reason it must be corrected in order to obtain full, mutual recognition. Even if we ignore Fichte and Hegel entirely, it seems to me that recognition theory as whole cannot be so naïve that it ignores the way in which power shapes subjectivity, identity, and agency.

While I believe that McNay is correct in pointing out that Taylor focuses too heavily on identity alone, I do not think that Honneth repeats this mistake. As we have seen in the first chapter, Honneth focuses on three elements of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. Although I have certain misgivings about liberalism in general, I think that rights are a way in which certain power balances can begin to be restored. They are certainly not a fix-all solution, but they have helped to shift massive power imbalances that have plagued the world. If we think again of the issue of women’s suffrage, we can think how the right to vote was the beginning of a fix for the massive power imbalance
between men and women that has plagued humanity, and continues to plague humanity, for as long as recorded history. By fighting for the right to vote, women began to take more control of their own agency. Power was necessarily at the heart of this fight since women were asking for men to recognize their ability to take part in the governing process; a power that has been denied to them up to that point. Identity politics, being a later 20th century phenomenon, had very little to do with this battle. Furthermore, it seems to me that power is also an important element in the love relationship. A love relationship that has a power imbalance between the people involved leads to misrecognition rather than proper recognition, leading to stilted psychological development as well as physical symptoms that result due to this stilted development. This is precisely what McNay has in mind when she wants to emphasize the notion of habitus.

McNay’s go to example for power is how one’s class position, and thus one’s access to material resources (a matter of power), comes to shape what one is capable of doing and who one is. From the standpoint of recognition theory, I must ask how it could ever be that a person’s position as a working class member of society, or as an upper class owner of resources, could not affect one’s conception of oneself or one’s basic capabilities. Power (or a lack of it) is one of the components that play an essential role in motivating why struggles for recognition happen in the first place. No one would care much if someone was disrespecting their identity if they were the ones in the dominant power position (unless they were afraid to lose what they have). In the Hegelian scenario, the master could not care less about what the slave thinks of him or her.

While I must grant that recognition theory has not conceived of power precisely in the way that McNay describes it (as habitus), I do not see anything inherent in this
concept that cannot be incorporated into the theory. Given that both Hegel and Honneth would argue that scientific concepts must be incorporated into one’s philosophical theories, it must be the case that recognition would take into account a notion that shows based on scientific grounds that power effects the very physical nature of the person. As a matter of fact, given everything that I have argued thus far concerning the effects of recognition on the most basic structure of humanity, it seems to me that this concept would be incorporated quite easily. However, I would strongly disagree with McNay that we must only look at this from a materialist perspective. I believe that the physical manifestations of the power imbalances that she describes have an even more damaging effect at the very level of human subjectivity, which cannot be properly accounted for on a strictly materialist account (although the material element adds an important component to recognition theory in general, as I have argued above).

Conclusion

As we have moved through the various criticisms of recognition theory, it becomes evident that the real issue at stake is the notion of identity. All of the different critics we have covered here have accused recognition theory of having a mistaken notion of identity and identity formation. Markell argued that one’s finitude was not taken into account, thus allowing for a sense of an unshakable, sovereign notion of identity. Oliver argued that recognition relied too heavily on the identity of the self, usually the dominant culture or oppressor, leading to the unacceptable leveling of differences. She thus called for an exploration of identity and subjectivity form the standpoint of the marginalized other. McNay put forward the idea that recognition theory first makes the mistake of
starting with identity to explain agency rather than the other way around, and she insisted that power plays a central role, if not the central role, in identity formation, which, she argues, recognition ignores.

I have shown here that all three thinkers are accusing recognition theory of things that it never claims in the first place. Identity is neither fixed nor stable; it is gained through a long process of intersubjective interactions between literally thousands upon thousands selves and others, shifting and changing depending on one’s socio-historical position. Furthermore, I have shown that Oliver is mistaken to start from the standpoint of the other. The self and the other are co-constituted in such a way that it does not make sense to begin from the side of either one. The interplay between both must be accounted for from the start since every human being is simultaneously a self and other. I believe that Oliver is essentially in agreement with recognition theory (as I have presented it) when she tells us that we must overcome antagonism in order to have healthy and loving subjectivity. Finally, I point out that McNay is simply mistaken in thinking that recognition does not take power into account. One of the main insights of the theory is that identity and subjectivity is shaped, and often stunted, by various power inequalities, be they of race, class or gender. Also, Fichte and Hegel are very much worried about power when they speak of the need for rights and the overcoming of the master/slave dialectic.

To all of this I would like to put forward an important addition. My notion of the ontological grounding of recognition, based in the idea that subjectivity and humanity itself are only manifested through recogntive relationships, sidesteps the heavy focus on identity altogether. If the very notions of what it means to be a subject and person are
dependent on there at least being *two* players, that is, dependent on the existence of the social, then misrecognition damages what we are at out very core. As all the critics point out, the damage can happen for a variety of reasons: it can happen because we want sovereignty, which is an impossible task given the need of the other; it can happen due to oppression; it can also happen because of the various misuses of power. Since this is the case, we don’t even need to bring discussions of identity at the outset of the theory. They are a manifestation, as symptom, of the deeper underlying condition that is embedded in the very structure of subjectivity itself. It is this notion of recognition that I have emphasized all throughout here. Identity is certainly important to understand in various social struggles, but it is essentially secondary to the notion of subjectivity. We have to start with this to even understand how identity functions in the first place and why it is important to our sense of self and our social struggles. I believe that this has been accomplished through my reading of Hegel and the various other thinkers considered here.
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