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Mutual Recognition: The Struggle for Power and Domination

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Abstract

This paper examines Hegel's description of mutual recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. On this account, development of a self-consciousness occurs only alongside another, separate and distinct self-consciousness. We find our identity and genuine sense of selfhood through family ties, civil society, and the state. Apart from others, we cease to exist—self-consciousness cannot be found in isolation. With this said, many internal and external complications ensue from obtaining recognition, our greatest desire, from another self which also seeks recognition. Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic is delineated along with the attainment of self-consciousness through social and political spheres. The emphasis he places on intersubjective relations of recognition for selfhood is compelling; however, his account is too cognitive and political and thus fails to adequately resolve the inequitable power dynamic at hand. Emotionality and friendship both transcend and dismantle the struggle for recognition and should therefore receive more attention in Hegel's account of attaining recognition.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel gives an account of self-consciousness and its necessary antecedent: mutual recognition. The presence and development of self-consciousness is a two-fold enterprise in which a singular self-concept is accompanied by another, separate and distinct self-consciousness. Both are made complete in the process of social life and interpersonal relationships, apart from which they dismantle. Self-consciousness exists for itself, independently, but also for the other and as a byproduct of the other, thus we identify the need for a mutually recognizing being. In this paper, I will be evaluating this idea of mutual recognition in relation to self-consciousness and selfhood, accounting for both descriptive concepts and ethical obligations which ensue. I will identify the origin of desire, how this dissatisfaction accompanying desire can be met, and the inequitable social relations

which arise in response to the desired recognition or lack thereof. I will additionally describe Hegel's response to the inequitable master-slave, lordship-bondsman, dialectic which arises and whether his interpretation and solution are sufficient.

Hegel's claim is that through desire we obtain a sense of vitality in life and that this very desire both reminds us and ensures that we are in fact spiritually alive. Our ultimate desire is not a vague, materialistic concept. Rather, our general dissatisfaction stems in part from lacking recognition—what we really want is to be recognized with some particular esteem. We pursue our desires daily which is the expression of our lives (Buchwalter 2020b, 11). We attempt to fulfil physical, sexual, and materialistic needs necessary for self-preservation and happiness, the underpinnings of which is the desire for recognition—to be fully known by another. Apart from social life, we cannot receive recognition and thus our concept of self not only remains incomplete, but nonexistent. Thus, we depend not on ourselves, but on others to fulfil our deepest desire, which is where we truly come to life.

Following this notion, a concern arises as our ultimate desire cannot be fulfilled independently, but necessarily requires another conscious being. We lose the façade of independence, trading it for recognition of our reliance on another being outside of ourselves with self-consciousness existing only alongside another, independent self-consciousness (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 92). This is a two-fold process. In finding itself as another being, the self-consciousness loses itself, but in losing itself within the other, it supersedes the other because it did not see the other autonomously, but in the other, it saw itself (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 92). Thus, we can identify the methodology of recognition: that the other, independent being must be superseded to become “certain of itself” and it is through this process of superseding the other, that it supersedes itself because the other is itself (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 92).

The supersession of otherness is, in fact, a return to self (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 93). It is a relational movement between two parties, yet it is simultaneously the action of oneself rather than two. Both are their own and the other's. We see this characterized in Hegel's claim that “each sees the other do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same.” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 93). The essence of mutual recognition is exemplified in the action of double significance: the self-consciousnesses recognize themselves recognizing the other and being

recognized, simultaneously. Self-consciousness is a “middle term” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 93) which divides into two extremes, both “recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 93).

This equitable recognition is fleeting, followed by a split of two opposing, inequitable extremes (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 93). Mutual recognition is disregarded for an unbalanced acknowledgement of the other in which only one is recognized and the other, only recognizing. Mutual recognition does not come easy and once reciprocity has been abandoned, certainty of the other is abandoned along with it. Thus, each is certain of itself, but not of the other and therefore, certainty of itself is an illusion. Each wants to be for itself, but it is only through being for the other and having the other be for them that being-for-self is plausible. One is intertwined with the other and vice versa—apart from the other it ceases to be what it knows itself to be and what it desires to be.

The temptation then arises to control the other and to make the other one’s own. If our self-concept is rooted in the recognition and perception of another, the other’s interpretation of us may conflict with our own perception of ourselves; our identity may be challenged by the other, and undesirably so. To atone for this disparity between the self-image we hope to portray and the other’s portrayal of us, we attempt to control the other—thus controlling ourselves. One solution to this atonement is to kill the other, “showing that [we are] not attached to any specific existence” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 94). The underpinnings of the solution to kill the other is rooted in our desire to control ourselves and to uphold our self-consciousness. On the basis of this notion, “each seeks the death of the other” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 94). Although this solution is counterproductive in that following the death of the other, we too die ourselves, dying alongside the other, it is necessary, nonetheless. The staking of our life through the “life-and-death struggle” proves to be a necessary event in which we gain freedom (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 94). Without this struggle for self-certainty we not only fail to gain freedom, but we also forfeit the recognition of independence from the other. It is in putting our life at stake and simultaneously the life of our counterpart that we establish our independence.

The temptation to kill the other is fleeting; both extremes put away their attempt to destroy the other’s existence and instead choose to favor their own existence. Along with this, they forfeit their desire to live independently and to “have an existence of their own” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 95). Both understand that a life intertwined

with the other is better than no life at all. A second solution then arises: a master-slave, lordship-bondsman relationship in which both continue to exist, inequitably. The stronger attempts to control the weaker, making the weaker their slave (Buchwalter 2020b, 14). The Lord exists for himself whereas the slave exists to serve the Lord; he holds the slave in bondage and finds his identity through the slave. This solution is also insufficient in that the Lord obtains only an imposed, forced sense of recognition from the slave. The slave does not provide the master with real, genuine recognition, but only the illusion of recognition, one which is not sincere and thus does not satisfy (Buchwalter 2020b, 14).

Furthermore, while the slave was once the sole dependent in the relationship, the master soon becomes dependent on the slave. The Lord's reliance on the bondsman is his downfall—he loses his independence and becomes dependent on the bondsman for identity. Apart from the slave, the master loses himself. His effort to receive recognition from the slave and thus, a sense of identity rooted in self-consciousness, makes him gradually dependent on the slave. The slave does all the work while the master reaps all the benefit; he becomes complacent, unskilled, and incompetent on his own (Buchwalter 2020b, 14). The master's newly developed dependence on the slave alters the power dynamics: the master now becomes a dependent slave, whereas the slave becomes a skilled, independent being, finding power through work. The slave, although seemingly forced into the mold of a service worker, gains identity, wisdom, and power in his craft. The slave recognizes that the world around both himself and the master is in fact their own creation and they played a part in its existence as they know it. It is through being objectified and belittled that the slave gains independence and consciousness (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 97). It is by using the slave as a means to an end that the master becomes enslaved to the slave.

Although the slave's newly gained independence comes through work forced upon him by the master, rather than his own work, he still has obtained a self-recognition which the master does not have access to (Buchwalter 2020b, 14). Hegel wants to claim that it is through work that “the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 97). It is through his labor that he expresses himself. The slave has gained that which is unavailable to the master; however, he finds no enjoyment or meaning through his labor. He works on a craft that is not his own; it is foreign and meaningless to him. The slave's labor is alienated labor and the result is a sense of disconnect from the world in which he lives and works. It is through this

alienated work that the slave “acquires a mind of his own” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 98), yet the price he pays is a life of disengagement and detachment.

The result is the idea of Stoicism: the slave obtains a newly found sense of power and peace in his death. The slave recognizes that although he possesses little power over his craft, he alone possesses the ultimate power and control over his existence (or lack thereof). It is through his death that independence and autonomy can be attained. This is an independence that the slave holds in his own hands; the master cannot take it from him. This ultimate recognition of the control he possesses over his life and death, grants him both freedom and determinism (Buchwalter 2020b, 15). Assertion of the slave’s independence and autonomy are only exemplified through death—the slave is free and determined only through disregarding his life.

Following Stoicism, we are led to a new and final dialectic bearing on the struggle for recognition. Although the slave finds solace and power in his own death, this resolution is problematic, nonetheless. The master-slave dialectic is not fully resolved: the slave only finds solace in his own death and the master is wholly dependent on the slave. Stoic consciousness does little to atone for the inequitable power dynamic and struggle for recognition which does not embody full, genuine recognition. Hegel’s claim is that the interests of both the master and slave are accounted for only when both consider the other as an end in themselves rather than as a means to self-fulfillment. Both the master and slave must forsake self-consciousness which cannot see the other as an independent being, but always sees the other only for itself.

Self-consciousness must be disregarded for a new standpoint: the standpoint of spirit (Buchwalter 2020b, 15). This is not intended to be a standard religious spirit, but a new religious spirit, a political spirit—one in which separation from the other is not an act of rejection of the other or of the self (Buchwalter 2020a, 6). Instead, this spirit is the component of a fulfilled completeness. On this account, each is able to view themselves as a complete whole emancipated from the other. This emancipation and completion enable each to view the other as an end in himself rather than an object to be controlled and objectified. At the heart of the standpoint of spirit is the idea of a political community in which independence, dependence, and most importantly, interdependence, are not at odds, but are simply conditions of life. Rather than attempt to control, modify, and alter our relations with another, we must accept them as necessary components of life, finding freedom in interdependence. Hegel further claims that the individual finds solace within history, recognizing

their individuality as a part of a larger, grander historical context. Rather than being solely enmeshed in another, the individual is enmeshed in history, playing a role in something larger than themselves and larger than the other.

Hegel's philosophy possesses a unique account of reason which branches away from the former narrow, cognitive ideologies which scientific Enlightenment thought perpetuated (Buchwalter 2020a, 11). Instead, he provides a dialectical framework of reason based on the reconciliation of opposites (Buchwalter 2020a, 10). This reconciliation manifests in the dialectic colloquialism, "as well as", insinuating that the preservation and unification of two contradictions, both reason and emotion, can exist within one philosophical framework. His account is distinguished from his predecessors and other counterparts in that rather than accepting a dualistic, intellectualist account of reason, he puts forth a synthetic account allowing for the upholding of two contradictory truths—reason and emotion can, in fact, coincide. With that said, harmony and the surmounting of oppositions is located in and largely credited to reason, which we see highlighted in the account on the ethical life (Buchwalter 2020a, 6).

Following the former notion of Hegel's dialectic philosophy, resolution to the master-slave dialectic and ultimate obtainment of mutual recognition is rooted in both reason and emotion as "necessary dichotomy is One factor of life" (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 41). Accounted for is an interaction, "a give and take" between contradictions as "a way of gaining truth" (Buchwalter 2020a, 12). With this said, Hegel places little emphasis on the emotional aspects necessary for recognition with greater importance given to a rational, reasonable account of mutual recognition. Although emotionality is not excluded from his account of the ethical life, the emotional account—reflected in love, friendship, and family—takes an inferior position and are superseded by civil society and the state (Buchwalter 2020c, 2). The emotional dimensions of recognition such as love, friendship, family, and pursuits of compassion, although incorporated, are not sufficiently touched on. Rather, he places primary emphasis on reason alone. In the *Philosophy of Right*, he delineates considerations of philosophy as the "exploration of the rational" claiming that "what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 178). This claim prefaces the importance of rationalism which Hegel soon emphasizes.

This focus on rationalism is unsurprising as his description of the ethical life, although accounting for, minimizes the importance of a "romantic focus on

emotionality” (Buchwalter 2020c, 2). Instead, the majority of acknowledgement and credit are given to rationale and cognitive components found within civil society and the state. This inequitable reconciliation of both reason and emotion is highlighted in Hegel’s emphasis on the importance of public duty over familial ties (Buchwalter 2020c, 10-11). This bias in favor of reason and rationale over emotionality, insufficiently acknowledges necessary components from the family life which are necessary for mutual recognition: love, intimacy, and friendship.

The family, the first stage in the ethical life, exemplifies the individual’s first experience within a social sphere. There we learn to value the other and our affiliation to the group. This social bond is immediate and unreflective; it is the natural starting point which allows us to develop social norms and collectivist ideologies. The family is connected through love, which starts with marriage, and marriage is not defined within the realm of a contract, but through a loving commitment to the other (Buchwalter 2020c, 10). The family is based on principles of both love and affection and the individual becomes an active participant within the group (Buchwalter 2020c, 12). Thus, the first social institution we exist within is the family; it is natural, organic, and unifies our concept of individuality and community. Within the family stage of the ethical life, Hegel showcases emotionality and affectivity as essential components of the political community and thus mutual recognition. However, the family stage, although maintained, is eventually superseded by civil society and the state.

The state brings the trilogy of the ethical life to a close and freedom through social institutions is ascertained. Membership within the state is more central than individual pursuits as “the individual is first and foremost a member of community” (Buchwalter 2020c, 10). It is through political community that identity is achieved. According to Hegel, subordination to the whole is a necessary condition for freedom, thus the individual must prioritize public duty and the good of the whole (Buchwalter 2020c, 11). Within the state, however, individual private interests are not completely disregarded. The family, although not a principle of the state, is referenced in the attempt to create a family-like political organism (Buchwalter 2020c, 15). This allows each citizen to feel like they are a part of something greater than themselves. The individual is no longer an alienated being but possesses an inherent membership which cannot be retracted.

Within Hegel’s account of the ethical life, which gives way to freedom through social institutions, the individual commits to the public good while preserving his

individualism. Hegel exemplifies the former notion in the statement, “The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom requires personal individuality” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 381). Although the state completes the ethical life, the family and civil society are both combined and preserved, nonetheless (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 382). Thus, freedom and mutual recognition are achieved through emotionality, cognition, and rationale with the former being more important than the latter. Rationality from the state ties everything together in the highest sophistication with emotionality from the family playing a less prominent role in freedom and recognition.

Thus, Hegel’s resolution for the struggle of self-consciousness through the master-slave dialectic places too much importance on rationality and not enough on emotionality. He provides a solid framework of communal importance and group cohesivity; however, it remains somewhat cold and narrow (although much less than the prevalent analytic, dualistic Enlightenment thought). The process of coming to be what one already is and fulfilling our desire for recognition is twofold—Hegel would agree. Siding with Hegel, we must recognize our place within history and our place within the political community where we act in a way that promotes the good of the group—that is, universally altruistic. Yet, we must place equal importance on the family life and other emotionally motivated pursuits for recognition.

For Hegel, political community supersedes individuality and recognition can be extended and received universally through the whole (Buchwalter 2020c, 15). Strangers are united globally and this unification allows self-identity to be ascertained by and given to those whom we have no meaningful relationship with—at least apart from the group. Although this rational concept of recognition through the state seems to address an inherent existing selfhood present within the collective group and our responsibility towards them, many gaps remain in the pursuit of complete recognition. The development of selfhood and identity necessarily requires recognition from others, yet simply existing alongside another in the same community is not sufficient. Selfhood in otherness is only fully grasped when a sense of vulnerability, intimacy, or love is present between two people; otherwise recognition remains distant and remote—a façade rather than genuine and real. It is not enough to receive selfhood solely through the state’s political community. Meaningful, intimate bonds are necessary for mutual recognition, with just as much importance placed on individualism as with collectivism.

As previously established, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel addresses the freedom we possess “in friendship and love” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 182). Yet, public duty is ultimately favored over family-based principles which are the ultimate representation of unconditional love and intimacy (Buchwalter 2020c, 15). The family, unreflective and immediate, is an important component of the ethical life, yet it remains inferior to the state. The family is connected through emotional and instinctive ties whereas the state represents mediation, reflectivity, and cognition. Ultimately, the state supersedes the family. One finds identity and relationship through the public sphere of the state. With this said, relationships and self-identity with emotion alone are unfulfilling—they cannot satisfy our desire for recognition in full. According to Hegel’s account of the ethical life, the state supersedes the family; however, the family life should play an equal or greater role in freedom and recognition to that of the state and accordingly, should receive such recognition. Intimacy and love are no less important in the obtainment of recognition than public duty and community.

We must know others intimately in order to appreciate their existence and our existence in affiliation to them. To fully recognize the other as an autonomous individual with hopes, dreams, and desires of their own, we must spend time in their presence, creating memories and bonds. It is impossible to appreciate dependence, independence, and interdependence within relationships unless we know the other for who they are and not for who they may appear to be *prima facie*. I can recognize a stranger as an autonomous being, yet it is impossible for me to separate myself from them and the service they can offer me (or vice versa) unless I know them on a deeper level. In all crafts and acts of service that we take part in and benefit from on a daily basis, we seldom experience the service worker for who they are outside of their job. Thus, we cannot fully grasp the concept of their independence apart from us. Within our acts of service and servitude, we cannot fully grasp those we are serving as they are, apart from us. We must know the other and experience the other outside of our craft in order to grant them and ourselves full recognition as separate entities.

Obtaining recognition and identity from others who don’t actually know us, but only know us as they perceive us, and not necessarily for who we really are, is infeasible. Another’s perception of us may be faulty as we are not entirely what we appear to others. There are pieces of us which can only be known by us and those we choose to confide in; these characteristics can never be recognized by one

who is not aware of them. Wrong and flawed first impressions are more common than not. Accordingly, recognition given from a flawed impression is recognition to a being who does not entirely exist. Recognition of an imagined identity or wrongfully perceived identity is recognition of a semblance, not a self. However, intimacy, vulnerability, and exposure transcend the constraints that impede genuine recognition, allowing for the true self to be recognized rather than the aura of a self. This act of disclosing oneself to others occurs through friendships, family ties, and intimate relationships. Through loving the other and seeing them as they are, we are able to give and receive the recognition we desire above all else. Recognition from those who we do not know and who do not know us is unfulfilling—a vain and vapid pursuit. Yet, recognition from those who know us in full, the good and the bad, is meaningful and thus possesses greater merit.

It is through love and friendship that genuine selfhood is established. This further enables the emancipation from an inequitable power dynamic to a mutual recognition. Selfhood in otherness allows each to view the other as an end in themselves rather than a means to an end. Through connection we view our counterpart not as something to be manipulated in order to extract recognition from, but as an independent, autonomous being. Through loving bonds, we are able to further establish an identity in relation to our counterpart while simultaneously upholding their true essence, recognizing them in return.

In this respect, however, a problem arises as friendships are often subjective and narrowly self-interested. We seek out friendships because they add quality to our lives and allow us to obtain our ultimate desire of recognition. Thus, a struggle for power may once again ensue. Seldom do we choose friendships which do not serve us in some manner or simultaneously benefit us in some dimension. One may argue that we most commonly seek out friendships with those who resemble us and share our same beliefs, desires, dreams, and interests. These common interests which, at the core, are the foundation of most friendships, may degenerate into self-love, thus perpetuating the struggle for power and domination. We may seek out friendships with those whose lives mirror our own in the attempt to once again grasp control over our own self; the other becomes a means to an end and the struggle for power resurfaces. In reality, friendships may serve as a method of self-gratification simply masked as love and affection. The underpinnings of such relationships may be self-interested and self-serving rather than intersubjective. Therefore, the argument

against a strong emphasis on emotionality is that, although genuine community could be understood through a framework of love and friendship, mutual recognition must also involve interaction with strangers to avoid the pitfall of narrow egoism. Intersubjectivity may only exist within unbiased, rational relationships.

Despite this claim that friendship and love may breed or degenerate into self-love rather than intersubjectivity, any friendship which degenerates into self-love is not true friendship, but the façade of friendship and, therefore, is no longer applicable to this claim of degeneration. True friendship is not self-serving. Although all unanimously benefit from loving friendships and partnerships, at the heart of it, true, loving relationships continuously seek the interest of the other. Nonetheless, relationships do exist in which individuals are focused on the self above all else, but these are not friendships nor are they loving and should not be confused as such.

Furthermore, many loving relationships exist in which the individuals present are not united by similar interests. Although we may attempt to seek out relationships with those who reflect our own beliefs, the most genuine and pure relationships are those which spontaneously arise over time; through intimacy, we grow to love the other for who they are and not for what common interest exists. We see past the other's differences from us, peering into the heart of their true self. We find solace not in sameness, but by the other's consolation, trust, and care; two individuals may have little to nothing in common and yet still be comforted by the union present between them. In fact, the notion that opposites attract, those who complement rather than mirror the other, seems to contradict the notion that friendships are solely rooted in similarities between individuals. Rather, the best and most genuine relationships thrive when differences between individuals exist which challenge them both to either refine their own beliefs, thus further finding certainty and self-realization within them, or modify them accordingly.

In line with Hegel's dialectic philosophy, love and friendship are both the acquisition of self-fulfillment and the giving of self-fulfillment (Buchwalter 2020a, 14). Love is a speculative dialectic. It is the act of fulfilling another's desires while vicariously achieving self-fulfillment in equal measure. The assertion of self-benefitting measures do not therefore imply that degeneration into self-love will ensue, thus further perpetuating the struggle of power and domination. Instead, the love given balances out the love received, eliminating the need to wage war against the other or against the self. Harmony is produced from the combination of opposition and what is gained

stems in part from “the unity in terms of their opposition” (Hegel & Houlgate 2005, 99). While narrow egoism becomes a barrier to itself, intersubjectivity becomes the foundation for mutual recognition.

Relations of recognition are thus not inherently life and death struggles—we can escape the modes of power and domination, yet this escape does not come easy. It requires that we come outside of ourselves and actively attempt to see the other for who they are. This demands effort on our part, effort to get to know the other and to remain open to intimate relationships. It requires that we put aside egocentric notions that the world and others exist for us. Instead we exist together, and our needs do not triumph over the needs of others. Furthermore, it requires that we remain open and genuine, allowing ourselves to be understood by our counterparts so that they too can recognize our independence from them. On this account, reason and emotion work in unison and share equal bearing in the pursuit and attainment of mutual recognition—neither is superior nor inferior to the other. Hegel and I agree that “things cannot be conceived without reference to what is opposite”; however, it is also necessary that opposites equally reference one another (Buchwalter 2020a, 12). In the obtainment of mutual recognition (our ultimate desire) emotional dimensions must receive more credit than Hegel gives. It is through vulnerability and intimacy we are able to put cease to relationships of power and domination.

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