

HEGEL ON THEORY AND PRACTICE

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A good many years ago, the Scottish philosopher George Elder Davie (then my teacher) explained to me that reading a difficult book resembled carrying a plank. If one gets the centre of gravity wrong, explained Davie, the plank is awkward and difficult to carry. If, however, one gets the centre of gravity firmly on one shoulder the load is balanced and the plank is easy to support. In the same way, a book becomes intelligible if (setting aside subsidiary issues) its conceptual centre of gravity is clearly grasped.

The present paper indicates how, I consider, the centre of gravity in Hegel's *Phenomenology* may be seen. My aim is less to identify the *Phenomenology's* centre of gravity conclusively than to outline a suggestion about where the centre might lie.

As a starting-point for my discussion, I note a criticism directed by Robert Williams against Alexandre Kojève's influential Hegel-interpretation. Williams comments that the *Phenomenology* 'is supposed to function as the self-accomplishing skeptical introduction to Hegel's system' whereas Kojève mistakenly sees the *Phenomenology* as providing a 'philosophical anthropology'.¹ Williams's comment contrasts two prevalent ways in which the *Phenomenology* has been seen.

If my account of the *Phenomenology's* centre of gravity is as suggested, we may conclude that an opposition between these prevalent readings need not exist. A reading of the *Phenomenology* as an 'introduction' tends to emphasise epistemological and "theoretical" issues, whereas a reading of the *Phenomenology* as a 'philosophical anthropology' tends to give "practical" issues pride of place. If my account is on the right lines, however, *neither* "theoretical" issues (on their own) *nor* "practical" issues (on their own) lie at

¹ R. R. Williams *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1997) pp. 66-7.

the centre of the *Phenomenology's* argument. What lies at the centre is a view of “theory” and “practice” as interrelated themes. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* does indeed introduce Hegelian ‘science’; but the reader to whom the introduction is addressed is seen as existing both in a “theoretical” and a “practical” way.

From the standpoint of a first-time reader (or, indeed, any reader) Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is an immensely difficult work. My suggestion is that it becomes easier – which is not to say that it becomes actually easy – if it is understood as an answer to the question: in what relation do *theory* and *practice* stand? Hegel’s answer to the question is that theory and practice form a unity, and exist in an internally related way. We grasp the *Phenomenology's* centre of gravity when we understand how, in Hegel’s view, the internal relation between theory and practice is to be seen.

Hegel’s understanding of theory’s relation to practice can, I suggest, be summarised in two sentences. Neither sentence is excessively long but, without explanation, both sentences are opaque. In the first place, Hegel maintains that *uncontradicted freedom* and *uncontradicted recognition* exist when – and only when – they exist together. (This is the “practical” part of Hegel’s argument.) In the second place, Hegel maintains that, where *uncontradicted freedom* and *uncontradicted recognition* exist, truth – or, in the Hegelian sense, ‘science’ – appears. (This is the part of Hegel’s argument that integrates “practical” and “theoretical” concerns.) In what follows, I attempt to remove the opacity that attaches to these sentences. I comment on each of the three just-mentioned terms – *freedom* and *recognition* and *truth* – in turn. My comments are (I am aware) all too schematic and brief.

1. *Hegel's conception of freedom*

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel declares that ‘of the absolute, it must be said that it is essentially a *result*’ (PS 20).² This declaration reads oddly. *Absolute* being is (I take it) *free* being: but how can *free* being be a *result*? The oddness disappears if absolute (or free) being is seen as *its own* result – or as a *result of itself*. If Hegel’s declaration is understood in this fashion, what it tells us is that *freedom* is to be understood in a manner that involves *self-determination*. The notion of self-determination is, I suggest, deeply rooted in Hegel. It is present when, for example, he comments (in his lectures on the philosophy of history) that ‘man’ – unlike ‘the animal’ – ‘acts in accordance with *ends* and determines himself in the light of a general principle. It is up to him to decide what end to follow’.³ Animals may (for Hegel) be free in the sense that they achieve goals that are instinctively implanted in them. Humans, however, may be free in the sense that they choose their purposes: in choosing their purposes, humans choose themselves.

The notion of *self-determination* has various logical peculiarities. The most striking of these is that, when we describe an individual as determining him or herself, the individual is – so to say – referred to twice-over: as the individual *who is determined* and as the individual *who does the determining*. Because the individual may *change* him or herself through self-determining action, the individual *who is determined* and the individual *who does the determining* may differ – and yet remain one and the same. This circumstance has led writers on self-determination to employ formulations that (intentionally) contain contradiction. Sartre, for example, refers to an individual *who is what he is not and is not what he is*. Hegel, to the same effect, sees action as involving a *unity of unity and difference* (e.g. PS 167). What contradicts (or “alienates”) freedom is not, for Hegel, contradiction *per se* but immobility or fixity through which self-determining action is denied or undermined.

A second logical peculiarity is less evident. It becomes apparent when the notion of self-determination is taken in a strict or literal way. Taken literally, a being which determines itself is a being that results from itself *alone*;

² ‘PS 20’ refers to paragraph 20 in A. V. Miller’s English translation of Hegel’s *Phenomenologie des Geistes* (G.W.F.Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977). Throughout my paper, I use the initials PS followed by Miller’s paragraph-number to identify passages in the *Phenomenology*.

³ Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975) p. 49. (See, similarly, Marx’s 1844 discussion of man’s ‘species being’.)

moreover, it is a being that *can result from nothing other than itself*. (If it existed by courtesy of anything other than itself, it would be determined by it – and it would cease to be self-determining.) Some such line of thought may, I suggest, underlie passages where Hegel writes of the ‘tremendous power of the negative’: ‘the life of the spirit is not’ – says Hegel – ‘the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it’ (*PS* 32). Spirit, or self-determining being, ‘has power to maintain itself in contradiction’.⁴ Whatever may be the basis of passages such as these, they have – I suggest – a direct implication for the way in which a condition of *unfreedom* is to be envisaged. For Hegel, a condition of *unfreedom* is not a condition where freedom is literally absent, but one where *freedom exists* – although in a *contradicted* or “alienated” way. It is freedom that exists in the mode of being denied.

So far, my schematic comments may seem to imply a starkly *individualist* view of self-determination. In Hegel’s view, however, such a view of self-determination would be a mistake. Although it may be that, as I have suggested, self-determining being *can result from nothing other than itself*, the “self” that does the “determining” is pictured by Hegel not in *solitary and atomistic* but in *social and interactive* terms. Human individuals do the determining, but these same individuals exist in a “dialogical” (rather than a “monological”) fashion. In Hegel’s words: ‘A self-consciousness exists *for a self-consciousness* [that is: a self-consciousness exists for *another* self-consciousness]. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness’ (*PS* 177). This “dialogical” and, as it were, plural conception of human individuality has far-reaching implications for how self-determining freedom is to be seen.

If human individuality is intrinsically “dialogical”, freedom begins to contradict itself when it is pictured in a “monological” way. If (for example) individuals are seen as free *in spite of one another*, as in conceptions of “negative” liberty, each individual’s ‘sphere’ of freedom presses upon, and delimits, the freedom that other individuals may possess.⁵ In his pre-

⁴ Hegel *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, para. 382 Zusatz. (*Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971, pp. 15-6.)

⁵ I employ the term ‘sphere’ in the sense given it by Fichte in his *Foundation of Natural Right*. Hegel criticises the Fichteian idea of ‘spheres’ in his *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1977) pp. 144-8.

Phenomenology writings, Hegel rejects a conception of freedom that turns on the idea of limits: ‘If the community of rational beings were essentially a limitation of true freedom, the community would be in and for itself the supreme tyranny’.⁶ In place of this conception, Hegel argues that freedom may exist not *in spite of*, but *in and through*, an individual’s relations with others: as in a good conversation or rewarding interaction, an individual’s capacity for self-determination may be strengthened by the circumstance that other individuals exist.

It is at this point in my sketch of Hegel’s understanding of freedom that the theme of *recognition* comes on to the scene. Freedom that exists *in and through* relations with others is freedom that presupposes the interactive, to-and-fro process of mutual acknowledgement in which – I shall argue – recognition exists. Not *every* pattern of recognition, or form of interaction, is, to be sure, compatible with the flourishing of uncontradicted (or non-alienated) freedom. For freedom to come into its own, and for uncontradicted or non-alienated freedom to exist, recognition’s to-and-fro process must be untrammelled and (what is to say the same thing in a different fashion) individuals’ freely-given recognition must be acknowledged in a free way. In a word, uncontradicted freedom exists only in and through mutual recognition. In one of the *Phenomenology*’s most often-quoted passages, Hegel refers to a ‘unity’ of self-consciousnesses ‘which...enjoy perfect freedom and independence: I that is We and We that is I’ (*PS* 177).

2. *Hegel’s conception of recognition*

A broad understanding of Hegel’s term ‘recognition [*Anerkennung*]’ can be gained by noting ideas that are associated with it: social existence, “dialogical” existence, interaction, acknowledgement (or acknowledgement-through-others) and so forth. The statement which introduces ‘recognition’ in the *Phenomenology*’s discussion gives a vivid idea of the family of ideas to which the term belongs: ‘self-consciousness [says Hegel] exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being recognized’ (*PS* 178). A self-consciousness (a human individual) who exists ‘only in being recognized’ is a self-consciousness who exists not

⁶ Hegel *Difference* p 145. (For discussion of the passage, see R. R. Williams *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* Albany: State University of New York Press 1992 p. 83.)

atomistically but in a social sense. Although the broad meaning of Hegel's term may be easy enough to gather, however, complex issues arise when the notion of 'recognition' is scrutinised in more detailed way.

One set of issues concerns the place of 'recognition' in the *Phenomenology's* overall argument. In chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, on 'self-consciousness', Hegel's introduction of 'recognition' is preceded by an account of 'desire' (PS 176-76): *desire* and *recognition* are presented as, in effect, two forms that 'self-consciousness' – practical human individuality – may take. The themes of desire and recognition (and the transition from the former to the latter) have been a focus of discussion amongst Hegel-commentators.⁷ What makes the transition to recognition crucial, and what allows Hegel to describe the introduction of recognition as a 'turning-point [*Wendungspunkt*]' in the *Phenomenology* (PS 177), is – I suggest – that *recognitive* existence contains possibilities of uncontradicted freedom that are beyond the reach of *desiring* (or *desirous*) existence alone. Recognitive existence contains possibilities of freedom because, as I have indicated, it is *in and through* (rather than *in spite of*) relations with others that uncontradicted freedom may be reached.

The question of recognition's place in the *Phenomenology's* argument has a further aspect. In chapter IV, when he introduces 'recognition', Hegel proposes that recognition comes into being through a life-and-death struggle (PS 186-8). The immediate outcome of this struggle is, he further proposes, the 'one-sided and unequal' (PS 191) recognition that is characteristic of the relation between Master and Slave. In the present paper, I make no attempt to comment on the *Phenomenology's* much discussed Master-Slave section.⁸ Nor do I comment on the fascinating and crucial Master-Slave passages which occur in Hegel's pre-*Phenomenology* writings.⁹ Instead, I offer a

⁷ See articles and passages collected in J. O'Neill (ed.) *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition* (Albany: SUNY Press 1996).

⁸ See, for example, A. Kojeve *Introduction to the reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books 1969) pp. 3-30, 38-43; G. A. Kelly 'Notes on Hegel's "Lordship and Bondage"' in A. MacIntyre (ed.) *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: University of Notre Dame Press 1976) pp. 189-217; J. M. Bernstein 'From consciousness to community: act and recognition in the master-slave relationship' in Z. A. Pelczynski (ed.) *The State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984) pp. 14-39; R. Stern *Hegel and the 'Phenomenology of Spirit'* (London: Routledge 2002) pp. 75-85; F. Beiser *Hegel* (London: Routledge 2005) pp. 185-91. The list could be indefinitely extended.

⁹ See G. W. F. Hegel *System of Ethical life and First Philosophy of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York 1979) pp. 124-5, 137-8, 236-42; L. Rauch *Hegel and the Human Spirit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1983) pp. 110-8.

highly schematic suggestion about how the Master-Slave section of the *Phenomenology* relates to Hegel's discussion of *history* later in the same work. I suggest that, for Hegel, history *begins* with the emergence of 'one-sided and unequal' recognition and *ends* when mutual recognition – recognition that goes together with uncontradicted freedom – has been achieved. History is, in effect, the “work” of transforming 'one-sided and unequal' recognition into mutual recognition – a “work” that goes forward through numerous stages wherein forms of *misrecognition* (or of *alienation*) obtain.

My comments on recognition's place in the *Phenomenology's* argument are offered mainly as suggestions. In the context of the present paper, the issue that I wish to emphasise is conceptual and thematic, rather than textual. It concerns what we may refer to as the *internal dynamic* of recognition in its Hegelian sense.

For Hegel, I propose, the term 'recognition' has not merely a *cognitive* but a *constitutive* meaning. That is to say, recognition involves more than *knowing* something *about* the individual who is recognized. It involves *making* the recognized individual (or *constituting* the recognized individual) what he or she is. Hegel makes the *constitutive* dimension explicit when he says, in a passage that I have already quoted, that self-consciousness *is* or *exists* 'only in being recognized'. But what conditions must be met, if this process of *constitution* is to take place?

The conditions are ones which concern freedom. In the first place, recognition counts as recognition only if it is freely given. In the second place, recognition counts as freely given only if it, itself, is recognized as being given in a free way. Taking these conditions together, we may conclude that *any* act of recognition requires that *both* of the just-mentioned acts of recognition are performed. We may further conclude that, for an act of recognition (in its “constitutive” sense) to succeed, individuals must *freely recognize* the recognition that is *freely given* by other individuals. Individuals must (in Hegel's words) '*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another' (*PS* 184). Our final conclusion may be that, when we *recognize* the *recognition* that is given by others, we construe the giving of recognition as a free and self-determining act.

In sum: *uncontradicted* (or *non-alienated*) recognition is *mutual* recognition. When recognition exists on its own (uncontradicted) terms, it exists as a to-and-fro interaction through which self-determining action is acknowledged and constituted and enhanced. When this to-and-fro interaction is interrupted or distorted, or made to flow in limited and restricted channels, recognition exists only in a contradicted (or alienated) form. When recognition is ‘one-sided and unequal’, the contradiction is at its most extreme.¹⁰ Between the extremes of *one-sided and unequal* recognition and *mutual* recognition, there has existed – as I have commented – a galaxy of situations where self-determining freedom is misrecognized in this or that way.

My sketch of the *internal dynamic* (or, in Hegel’s word, the *process*) of recognition is admittedly abstract. However, what I have said sheds light on the suggestion that individuals may be free not *in spite of*, but *in and through*, their relations with one another. They can be free *in and through* their relations with others to the extent that mutual recognition exists. Freedom *in spite of one another* – “negative” freedom – is freedom that turns its back on the process of cognitive interaction, or makes its peace with an inadequate or incomplete form of cognitive interaction. It does not yet amount to freedom that exists in a full and uncontradicted way.

In presenting (however schematically) what I take to be Hegel’s conceptions of *freedom* and of *recognition*, I have – in effect – attempted to execute a conceptual pincer movement. I have attempted to show that freedom exists on its own (uncontradicted) terms only when mutual recognition obtains; and I have attempted to show that recognition exists on its own (uncontradicted) terms only when *what is recognized* is self-determining freedom. Freedom (in order to *be* freedom) needs recognition, and recognition (in order to *be* recognition) needs freedom. The two arcs of my argument – the arc concerning *freedom* and the arc concerning *recognition* – come together in the idea of *mutual recognition*: when mutual recognition exists, then and only then do *uncontracted freedom* and *uncontradicted recognition* obtain. Freedom and recognition remain alienated, from themselves and from one another, until the unconstrained

¹⁰ In the relation of Master and Slave, where recognition is ‘one-sided and unequal’, the Master (in order to count as a Master) depends on recognition – recognition by the Slave – which at the same time he despises and denies.

and undistorted flow of mutually recognitive interaction dictates its own terms.

3. *Hegel's conception of truth*

So far, my discussion has concentrated on “practical” themes in the *Phenomenology*. I have sought to show how the intersecting themes of *freedom* and *recognition* are fundamental to Hegel’s view of the practical world. Now, I turn from questions about “practice” *per se* to questions about how, in Hegel’s view, “theory” and “practice” are related. My suggestion is that Hegel’s distinctive conception of practice allows the relation between theory and practice to be seen in an intriguing way.

In the *Phenomenology’s* Preface, Hegel makes two claims that stand out because of their seemingly implausible nature. One is that Hegelian ‘science’ is ‘at once exoteric, comprehensible, and capable of being learned and appropriated by all’ (*PS* 13). The claim strikes us as implausible because, surely, Hegelian ‘science’ is – however we view it – complex to a labyrinthine extent. The other is that ‘it is the nature of truth to prevail when its time has come’, that it ‘appears only when its time has come’ and that it ‘never appears prematurely, nor finds a public not ripe to receive it’ (*PS* 71). This claim strikes us as implausible because it seems to presuppose, in an “idealist” fashion, that ‘truth’ generates its own ‘public’ – or, stated differently, that “theory” determines the form that “practice” will take.

I suggest that these seemingly implausible claims admit of a plausible interpretation. If *something in the practical situation that individuals inhabit* gives them a purchase on the categories of ‘truth’ and ‘science’, they can be seen as capable (before they turn a single page of the *Phenomenology*) of understanding what Hegel has to say. They will be individuals who are, indeed, ‘able to attain to rational truth by way of the ordinary understanding’ (*PS* 13) and they will count as a ‘public’ able to understand the ‘truth’ that the *Phenomenology* will expound. For Hegel, I suggest, the appearance of ‘truth’ – Hegel’s own ‘truth’ included – has “practical” rather than merely “theoretical” preconditions. Can we say what these practical conditions might be?

My proposal, in the present paper, is that (in Hegel’s view) *mutual recognition* is the condition that allows ‘science’ to flourish. The ‘public’

which is ripe to receive ‘truth’ (PS 71), and to whom the *Phenomenology* is addressed, is a mutually recognitive public. Hegel’s *Phenomenology* sees itself as being written in the ‘new world’ that the French Revolution has inaugurated (PS 11); and this world is – however precariously – a world where mutual recognition appears. Hegel claims that science may be exoteric because, in consequence of the French Revolution, an audience that *can be presumed to be mutually recognitive* exists.

Such an approach has implications for the way in which Hegelian ‘science’, itself, is to be considered. I note two implications briefly, less to insist on them as conclusions than to indicate where my interpretation leads.

A first implication is that Hegelian ‘science’ can be seen as turning upon a “consensus”, rather than upon a “coherence”, theory of truth. According to a “coherence” theory, a claim counts as true if, and only if, it forms part of a ‘completely rounded [conceptual] system’.¹¹ According to a “consensus” theory, the idea of truth is to be equated with the idea of agreement: more specifically, it is to be equated with agreement reached through open and unconstrained discussion. A claim counts as true if it survives discussion that is *unrestricted in scope* and *open to all comers*. That is to say, it counts as true if it survives in a situation where mutual recognition obtains. Note that truth, thus understood, counts as in principle changeable. (For this reason, I prefer Miller’s translation of *Absolute Wissen* – the title of *Phenomenology*_chapter VIII – as ‘absolute knowing’ rather than, more traditionally, ‘absolute knowledge’.) Note, too, that a definition of truth that is linked to open discussion is a definition where no fixed group identity is invoked.

A second implication is that Hegelian ‘science’ – or, at least, Hegelian ‘science’ as presented in the *Phenomenology*¹² – is science that exists in a “dialogical” sense. Not merely does Hegelian ‘science’ presuppose mutual recognition: the scientist sees him or herself as standing in (and as constituted by) mutual recognition’s interactive flow. The same point can be made by shifting attention from the scientist to science’s audience. Because ‘science’ appears only before an audience that is mutually recognitive, it

¹¹ See B. Russell *The Problem of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press 1967) p. 70.

¹² A vexed question in Hegel-scholarship is whether ‘science’ in the *Phenomenology* and ‘science’ in the *Encyclopaedia* are one and the same. I do my best to avoid this issue here.

exist only insofar as it is learned and appropriated in a *questioning* and *evaluative* (rather than a merely passive and accepting) way.

These brief comments on science's "dialogical" status allow me to give my interpretative argument a final twist. I have emphasised that scientific has practical (mutually recognitive) preconditions. To this claim I add the suggestion that mutual recognition, itself, goes forward in a 'scientific' – or, at any rate, a potentially 'scientific' – way. In the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel characterises knowing (*Wissen*) as 'seeming inactivity which merely contemplates how what is differentiated spontaneously moves in its own self' (PS 804). That is, he characterises knowing as phenomenology – or as, at least, *involving* phenomenology. The phenomenology to which Hegel alludes, and which he sees as fundamental to science, is – I take it – a phenomenology of a dialogical and intersubjective kind. Rather than attempting to observe sensations in a solitary or Cartesian splendour, a Hegelian phenomenologist adds a question to the descriptions of experience that he or she provides. The question is: "It's like this...isn't it?" – and the individual to whom the question is addressed is (or may be) an individual other than the phenomenologist him or herself. A Hegelian phenomenologist is not merely an observer but an interlocutor in the worlds that he or she describes. If all this is so, then, we may say, mutual recognition goes forward *in and through* the form of descriptive theorising that Hegel has in mind. We may also say that, since the experience that Hegel describes and invokes is the experience not merely of *oneself* but of *others*, a skill that Hegelian science presupposes is empathy or social imagination – 'sympathy', approximately in the sense of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

How might my attempt to identify the *Phenomenology's* centre of gravity be evaluated? A minimum condition is that its use must be demonstrated in a chapter-by-chapter account of the *Phenomenology*. To change the metaphor that I have been employing: my paper attempts to supply a reader of the *Phenomenology* with a clue, and what is required is an account of the consequences if this clue is followed.

No such account is attempted here. Instead, I end by noting a paradox. If my attempt to identify the *Phenomenology's* centre of gravity is successful, then (it may be urged) its failure is to be expected. If my attempt succeeds, it follows that (according to Hegel) the *Phenomenology* remains unintelligible – unless mutual recognition comes into its own. In a world where mutual recognition is occluded, Hegel's works (including the *Phenomenology*) have – as Young Hegelian writers of the 1830s and 1840s acknowledged – an esoteric rather than an exoteric status.

My response to such a line of thought is to restate the argument of my paper in the form of a question. Is it Hegel's fault or, rather, is it our own fault that we find his works difficult to read?