

HISTORY'S BEGINNING AND HISTORY'S ENDING IN HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

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In the present paper, I comment on Hegel's conception of history in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹ My comments take as their point of departure a suggestion about how the *Phenomenology's* conception of history may be seen. Before launching my discussion proper, I sketch the suggested view in a brief and, thereby, schematic way.

In the *Phenomenology*, I suggest, Hegel thinks of *history* as a *history of recognition*. He regards history as the story of the successive forms that recognition takes. More specifically, Hegel thinks of history as a long and arduous "work" through which recognition that is 'one-sided and unequal' (*PS* 191) is transformed into recognition that is mutual (see *PS* 184, 640, 644 653). History is pictured by Hegel as *beginning* when 'one-sided and unequal' recognition emerges and as *ending* when mutual recognition is achieved. Between the beginning and the end of Hegelian history, a sequence of distorted or incomplete or "alienated" forms of recognition (discussed in *Phenomenology* chapter VI) obtain.

Besides portraying history as a history of recognition, Hegel (I suggest) indicates where, in historical terms, the writing of the *Phenomenology* lies. Hegel thinks of the *Phenomenology* as being composed at the end of history.² The event which brings history to its close is, for Hegel, the French Revolution; and the *Phenomenology* – written in 1806-7 – is seen by Hegel as illumined by the light that the French Revolution casts (*PS* 11). In effect,

¹ G. W. F Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1979). References in my text are by *PS* followed by Miller's paragraph numbers. The German edition that I have used is Hegel *Werke in zwanzig Banden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 1970) vol. 3.

² See *PS* 802: 'until spirit has completed itself *in itself*, until it has completed itself as world-spirit, it cannot reach its consummation as *self-conscious* spirit.'

the *Phenomenology* tells the story of the emergence (through Revolution) of the mutually recognitive audience to which it, itself, is addressed.

My aim in the present paper is not to marshal arguments for or against this schematically-presented view. Contentious though the view is,³ I take its validity for granted – at any rate, as a basis for discussion. In what follows, my aim is to explore issues that are crucial if the view (or *some version of* the view) is adopted.

The issues that I select for discussion concern, mainly, the *beginning* and the *ending* of Hegelian history. If history is a history of recognition, how does recognition itself originate? If history ends when mutual recognition is achieved, what account of the emergence of mutual recognition does Hegel give? The largest part of my paper explores issues concerning the *Phenomenology's* “Master-and-Slave” section (*PS* 185-96) – which, I suggest, contains Hegel’s answer to the question of how recognition’s beginning is to be seen. In the later sections of my paper, I look ahead in the *Phenomenology's* argument to ask whether problems concerning ‘recognition’ are resolved.

1. *A note on ‘recognition’*

Before turning to the issue of history’s beginning, and of recognition’s coming into being, I indicate how (in my view) Hegel’s term ‘recognition [*Anerkennung*]’ is to be understood.

In a general sense, Hegelian ‘recognition’ is linked to themes of interaction and human intersubjectivity.⁴ In and through interaction, Hegel considers, human identity is formed. In the words of the *Phenomenology*: ‘a self-consciousness [a human individual] exists *for a self-consciousness*. [Hegel means: it exists for *another* self-consciousness.] Only so is it in fact

³ My contentious view derives loosely from A. Kojeve’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books 1969) although I make no attempt to follow Kojeve literally. For influential criticisms of Kojeve – criticisms which I think of as misguided – see H. S. Harris ‘From Hegel to Marx via Heidegger’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* Vol. 13 (1983) and R. R. Williams *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1997) pp. 10-3, 65-7, 366-7.

⁴ To the same effect, Williams links Hegelian recognition to ‘interhuman’ existence. See R. R. Williams *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1992) pp. 73, 89.

self-consciousness' (PS 177). Or again: '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 recognized [*es ist nur als ein Anerkanntes*]' (PS 178). This latter passage presents recognition as an interactive process which makes an individual what he or she is. Stated differently, the passage emphasises that, for Hegel, recognition has a *constitutive* (rather than a merely *cognitive*) force.

Hegel's account of 'recognition' becomes more specific, and more distinctive, when his views on *freedom* and *recognition* are considered together.⁵ For Hegel, freedom and recognition exist through one another. *Freedom* – which Hegel understands in the sense of self-determination – counts as such only when it is recognized. *Recognition* counts as such only when it is freely given and when, moreover, it is freely recognized as being free. Much in the *Phenomenology's* argument turns on the question of how – according to Hegel – freedom (thus understood) and recognition (thus understood) stand related. In a situation where there is 'one-sided and unequal' recognition, the demands of a *freedom that must be recognized* and a *recognition that must be free* fail to integrate: as it were, freedom and recognition are allocated to different individuals who occupy different social roles.⁶ In a situation of mutual recognition, by contrast, the freedom of one individual is recognized by others and this recognition is, for its part, recognised as free.

My comments on 'recognition' attempt to give a sense of the term's significance for Hegel. In particular, they attempt to highlight the importance of *mutual recognition* as a category in the argument that the *Phenomenology* presents. In a situation where there is mutual recognition, there and there only – my comments suggest – uncontradicted (or "non-alienated") freedom and uncontradicted (or "non-alienated") recognition exist in a conjoint way. Freedom and recognition come into their own and, at the same time, cease to contradict one another⁷ when mutual recognition is achieved.

⁵ This paragraph (and most of the present section) draws on my 'Hegel on Theory and Practice', paper presented at the Istanbul International Hegel Congress (6-7 Oct 2007).

⁶ For example, the social roles of 'Master' and 'Slave'.

⁷ An e.g. of an account of freedom that *contradicts* recognition is the conventional notion of "negative" freedom – freedom *from* others, or freedom *in spite of* others.

3. *History's beginning*

Hegel's account of *how history begins* is contained, I propose, in the *Phenomenology's* most famous section: the section, that is to say, on the emergence and the development of the social relation between Master and Slave (PS 185-96). Before embarking on discussion, I comment (briefly) on the section's context in the *Phenomenology's* discussion and I outline events that the Master-Slave section presents.

Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*, in which the Master-Slave section is situated, discusses desire and recognition as forms that 'self-consciousness' – or, in other words, human individuality – may take. The chapter opens with a discussion of *desiring* self-consciousness (PS 167-77) and then, following a short section on the general idea or concept of recognition (PS 178-84), turns to an account of how, 'at first' (PS 185), recognition makes its appearance. Recognition makes its appearance, we gather, through the process that is traced in the section on Master and Slave.

The section opens with an account of a 'life-and-death struggle' (PS 187) between self-consciousnesses (or human individuals). The outcome of the struggle is submission, through 'absolute' fear (PS 194, 196), of one self-consciousness to another. The self-consciousness who submits, and who becomes Slave, recognizes the authority of the Master. By contrast, the self-consciousness who is victorious, and who becomes Master, regards the Slave as inhabiting a realm of sub-human 'thinghood [*Dingheit*]' (PS 189): although the Slave recognizes the Master, the Master denies the human status that might allow the Slave's recognition to be recognized for its part. In the paragraphs which follow, Hegel explores the inner logic of the 'one-sided and unequal' recognition (PS 191) that a Master-Slave relation entails. Initially, in a Master-Slave relation, it is the Master who appears to be the *essential* and *independent* self-consciousness; in due course, however, it becomes apparent that 'the *truth* of the independent consciousness is... the servile consciousness of the Slave' (PS 193). The Master *depends* on the Slave – and this dependence takes various forms. In the first place, the Master depends for the satisfaction of his desire upon the work that the Slave performs. In addition, and most crucially, the Master depends on the Slave for recognition of his "Masterful" social status. What is crucial about this latter form of dependence is that (as we have seen) recognition by the Slave is recognition which the Master disparages and denies. The Master (in order

to count as master) depends on recognition that he (as Master) considers worthless. An implication of this point is that one-sided and unequal recognition, such as recognition exemplified in the relation of Slave and Master, is not merely demeaning – this Hegel takes for granted – but inherently unstable. It is recognition existing in a contradictory (or self-contradictory) form. Hegel rounds off the Master-Slave passage in the *Phenomenology* by presenting the work of the Slave – and not, we may note, the heroic deeds of the Master – as the source of objectivity and permanence in the human world.

How should we interpret this vivid passage? My suggestion is that the ‘life-and-death-struggle’ which forms the starting-point of the Master-Slave section is, for Hegel, the process through which (for the very first time) *recognition* – and thereby *history* – comes into being. *Prior to the life-and-death struggle that Hegel envisages, recognition has no existence. Across the face of the earth, relations of recognition are absent: more than this, the very idea of recognition is meaningless to individuals who (in the terminology of Phenomenology chapter IV) exist merely in a desiring (and not at all in a recognitive) way. After the life-and-death struggle, and as a consequence of it, recognition exists – albeit in a ‘one-sided and unequal’ manner. Once the relation of Master and Slave has come into being, through struggle, the long march of history from recognition that is one-sided and unequal to recognition that is mutual gets under way.*

How may my interpretation be defended? Here, rather than attempting a systematic defence, I set my interpretation alongside a currently-widespread view of how the *Phenomenology’s* Master-Slave section is to be seen. The view concerned is that according to which the Master-Slave section turns throughout on the idea of a *struggle for recognition*.⁸ In regard to this widespread view, I offer three claims:

- (i) that a “struggle for recognition” view the Master-Slave section and my own suggested interpretation are mutually inconsistent;

⁸ On *struggle for recognition*, see A. Kojève *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* pp. 7, 11-2, 41; A. Kelly ‘Notes on Hegel’s “Lordship and Bondage”’ in A. MacIntyre, ed., *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Notre Dame University Press 1976) p. 195; A. Honneth *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995) esp. pp. 62, 145; L. Siep ‘The Struggle for Recognition: Hegel’s Dispute with Hobbes in the Jena Writings’ in J. O’Neill (ed.) *Hegel’s Dialectic of Desire and Recognition* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1996) p. 273. See also references to Stern and Bieser in notes 12 and 13, below.

- (ii) that a “struggle for recognition” view can be rejected without doing violence to the *Phenomenology*’s text; and
- (iii) that, if a “struggle for recognition” view is set aside, a fascinating reconstruction of the ‘life-and-death struggle’ in *Phenomenology*’s Master-Slave passage becomes possible. This reconstruction indicates how, in detail, recognition begins.

Following a brief cautionary note, I explain and attempt to justify my claims.

My cautionary note warns a reader of the deep (and sometimes frustrating) complexity of passages by Hegel that employ the Master-Slave motif. Hegel employs the motif not merely in the *Phenomenology* but in a number of his earlier and later writings.⁹ In different Master-Slave passages, and sometimes (confusingly) in one and the same passage, he employs the motif to explore different themes. On some occasions, his aim is (as I have suggested) to shed light on the question of how recognition comes into being. On other occasions, his aim is to explore a situation where owners of property think of recognition as a “prize” to be obtained – or, in other words, in “proprietary” way. Still further themes are, arguably, present in Hegel’s Master-Slave discussion.¹⁰ My point here is, merely, to emphasise that conceptual issues in Hegel’s Master-Slave discussion map on to sections of text in an irretrievably “messy” and untidy way. Readers of Hegel should (I suggest) free themselves of the expectation that Master-Slave passages have a single subject-matter. Master-Slave passages do indeed, I argue, address the *problem of beginning*. But the *problem of beginning* is one problem amongst others – if, perhaps, the most fundamental problem – that Master-Slave passages attempt to solve.

(i) *Struggle for recognition versus recognition’s beginning*

⁹ See, for example, Hegel *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press 1979) pp. 124-6, 136-9, 236-42; ‘The Philosophy of Spirit (1805-6)’ in L. Rauch (ed.) *Hegel and the Human Spirit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1983) pp. 110-8; *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991) para. 57; *Philosophy of Mind [or Spirit]*, paras. 430-5.

¹⁰ Harris (in his editorial note to Hegel *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit* p. 235, fn. 45) and Williams (in his *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* pp. 96, 98) suggest that a key theme is the transition from society based on pre-modern families (or “clans”) to society based on modern law. I remain doubtful about whether Hegel is thinking in these terms.

Discussion of the part played by *struggle for recognition* in the *Phenomenology* faces an initial difficulty: the term “struggle for recognition” can, itself, be understood in a broad (and logically weak) or a narrow (and logically strong) sense. Understood in a broad fashion, the term refers – let us agree – to all struggle whatever that furthers recognition’s development. Understood in a narrow fashion, the term refers to struggle that seeks to obtain recognition as a much-sought-after “prize”. When the term is understood in a narrow fashion, its reference is to struggle *for* recognition in a strict or literal sense. In what follows, I shall take it that the form of *struggle for recognition* most often ascribed to Hegel is struggle for recognition in (roughly) the narrow or literal meaning of the term. When I employ the term “struggle for recognition” in the remainder of my discussion, the qualification “in its narrow sense” is implied.

I have suggested that, for Hegel, recognition comes into being through the ‘life-and-death struggle’ which leads to the Master-Slave relation. According to the widespread view that is here under discussion, this struggle is for its part a struggle for recognition. Kojève (for example) regards the struggle as a fight ‘for “recognition”’ or for ‘pure prestige’.¹¹ Stern (to take another and more recent example) regards the struggle as a fight not merely *for recognition* but *for recognition of ones worthiness to be recognized*.¹² Beiser refers in the same connection to the ‘self’ who ‘fights for recognition of itself as a rational being’.¹³ Stern’s and Beiser’s formulations are, to be sure, more complex than the equivalent formulations in Kojève’s commentary: neither author disputes the notion of a *struggle for recognition*, however, but adopts it in order to advance beyond it. Stern is explicit in maintaining that the struggle is not merely motivated by ‘desire’,¹⁴ as would be the case if the issue of struggle for recognition had not come on the scene.

My own view of the ‘life-and-death struggle’ to which Hegel refers stands at the opposite conceptual extreme of the view that Kojève *et al* favour. Dissenting from the interpretation of Master-Slave passages that has

¹¹ Kojève p. 7; see also p. 41.

¹² R. Stern *Hegel and the ‘Phenomenology of Spirit’* (London: Routledge 2002) pp. 77-8.

¹³ F. Beiser *Hegel* (London: Routledge 2005) p. 187.

¹⁴ See Stern p. 76.

become widespread, I claim that the life-and-death struggle which leads to Mastery and Slavery *is not* and – unless conceptual incoherence is involved – *cannot* be a struggle for recognition. (To make the point explicit: I claim that it is not, and cannot, be a struggle *for* recognition in the narrow or literal sense.) In passing, I should note that my dissenting claim is raised *only* where the ‘life-and-death struggle’ in the Master-Slave section is concerned. I make no objection whatever to the idea of struggle for recognition *once the one-sided and unequal recognition of Mastery and Slavery has come into play*. In such circumstances, struggle for recognition is not merely *possible* but *inescapable*: it is inescapable insofar as *recognition as an objectified, and reified, to-be-struggled-for prize* is a form which which contradictory or “alienated” recognition takes.

In claiming that the ‘life-and-death struggle’ in the *Phenomenology’s* Master-Slave section *is not* a struggle for recognition, I raise a textual issue that I comment upon presently. In claiming that the ‘life-and-death struggle’ in the *Phenomenology’s* Master-Slave section *cannot* (under pain of incoherence) be a struggle for recognition, I raise a conceptual- as distinct from textual – issue that I outline here.

If the ‘life-and-death struggle’ envisaged by Hegel is a struggle for recognition, it is a struggle where each combatant is (however hazily) *familiar with the idea of recognition* from the very beginning of struggle – and is so, even before the struggle opens. A struggle *for* recognition is a struggle *over*, and *about*, recognition. It is a struggle *whose motive is the possession of recognition* and, if it is this the case, it is a struggle where familiarity with recognition in the minds of the combatants is already assumed.

If, by contrast, the ‘life-and-death struggle’ envisaged by Hegel is to be seen as process through which recognition comes into being, recognition must be seen as non-existent before the struggle takes place. If, prior to the life-and-death struggle, the very idea of recognition is *meaningless* to self-conscious individuals, combatants cannot (however hazily) be familiar with the idea of recognition *before* the fight, or at the moment when the fight begins. Recognition cannot be a motive for the fight, because it cannot be an issue that is present in the minds of combatants at the moment when the fight is launched.

In sum: if the ‘life-and-death struggle’ is to be seen as a process through which recognition comes into being, it cannot (coherently) be seen as a struggle for recognition. If the struggle is to be seen as a struggle for recognition, it cannot (coherently) be seen as recognition’s beginning. If the struggle is seen *both* as a process that brings recognition into being *and* as a struggle for recognition, the sequence of events set out by Hegel in the *Phenomenology’s* Master-Slave section becomes a scenario that presupposes the recognition whose beginning it was supposed to show. Vicious circularity is the result if, in an eclectic fashion, readings that stress *struggle for recognition* and *recognition’s beginning* are conflated or combined.¹⁵

An objection to my line of argument may be raised. It is to the effect that I picture the beginning of recognition in excessively arduous terms. Before recognition begins it must, indeed, count as *non-existent* – but must it count as (for individuals) *meaningless* as well? My reply is that recognition’s *beginning* (if it is to count as a *beginning*) involves more than a fresh application of recognition as an already-familiar or already-established idea. My further reply is that familiarity with recognition as an idea is most commonly rooted in recognitive practice of some sort. If recognition is familiar, this is generally because it already exists – not merely as an idea but in a social and political form.¹⁶

My conclusion is the present section of my argument is that a “struggle for recognition” approach to Hegel’s discussion is incompatible with an approach that stresses the theme of history’s beginning. In the two sections of my argument that follow, I move this conclusion closer to the *Phenomenology’s* text.

(ii) *Is Hegel’s ‘life-and-death struggle’ a struggle for recognition?*

Is there commanding evidence in the text of the *Phenomenology* that, rightly or wrongly, Hegel sees ‘life-and-death struggle’ at the start of the Master-Slave section as a struggle for recognition? I propose that there is no

¹⁵ Kojève rightly thinks of the Master-Slave section as discussing ‘the “origin” of Self-Consciousness’ (*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* p. 7) but wrongly sees it as turning on the idea of a struggle for recognition. This conflation of issues has been responsible to immeasurable confusion in Hegel scholarship.

¹⁶ For example, it exists in and through private property and the family (which need not be a pre-modern family: see note 10, above).

such evidence. Passages quoted to show that such evidence exists admit of an alternative interpretation.

In the paragraphs of the *Phenomenology* that introduce the theme of life-and-death struggle (PS 186-8), formulations occur which do, indeed, appear to point towards a “struggle for recognition” interpretation. Hegel declares, for example, that individual self-consciousnesses ‘must engage in this [life-and-death] struggle if they are to raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth’ (PS 187). ‘Certainty’, in Hegel’s usage, obtains at the level of *desire* whereas ‘truth’ exists through *recognition*. This being so, Hegel’s declaration is to the effect that individuals must struggle if they, themselves, are to be recognized. But does this mean that (in Hegel’s view) individuals must struggle *for recognition*? Is the ‘must’ in the quoted passage the ‘*must*’ of *intentionality* or – merely – the ‘*must*’ of *conditionality*? Is Hegel saying anything more than that, if recognition is to come into being, a life-and-death struggle (of some kind) must take place? Does the quoted passage say *anything whatever* about what the goal or the objective in such a struggle must be?

A more difficult issue is raised by passages on life-and-death struggle that refer to individuals as *risking their own lives*. There can be no doubt that Hegel ascribes to *risking of ones life* a positive value: ‘it is through staking [or risking] ones life that freedom is won’ (PS 187). But what value is this? Is *risking of ones life* valuable because it demonstrates a sense of honour? Or is it valuable because, in a conflict, it increases ones chance of obtaining recognition? Directly or indirectly, both of these suggestions feed into, and support, a “struggle for recognition” view. However, there is a third possibility.

Perhaps, Hegel ascribes a positive value to *risking ones life* because a situation where life is risked is a situation where some further (related) circumstance is brought into play. And, perhaps, this *further circumstance* is not one that *improves an individual’s chances of obtaining recognition* – as might be the case if, say, a sudden flush of confidence gave the individual an advantage in combat. Perhaps, on the contrary, the *further circumstance* is that the struggling individual is *overwhelmed by fear* – a fear of death which has (as Hegel says) penetrated ‘ever fibre’ of the individual’s being (PS 194). Might Hegel not be proposing that, through the experience of fear, the individual becomes *inspired to give* (rather than *qualified to obtain*) recognition?

This question leads me to the reading of the Master-Slave scenario that I present in the following section of my discussion. My general objection to a “struggle for recognition” reading is that such an interpretation presents the events of the Master-Slave dialectic in a heroic (rather than an anti-heroic) light.

(iii) *Hegel’s account of history’s beginning: an anti-heroic reconstruction*

A “struggle for recognition” account of the *Phenomenology’s* Master-Slave section presupposes (I claim) the recognition whose beginning it was supposed to show. It assumes that recognition is *at issue* for self-consciousness before the struggle leading to Mastery and Slavery begins. Here, I indicate a reading of the Master-Slave section that dispenses with this assumption. My reading presents the Master-Slave section as an account of – in Arendt’s words – a ‘new beginning’.¹⁷

Above, I noted that chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* discusses ‘desire’ and ‘recognition’ as forms that self-consciousness (human individuality) may take. Human individuals may be *desiring* and/or they may be *recognitive* beings. The process through which human individuals become not merely *desiring*, but also *recognitive*, beings is traced (I have suggested) in the *Phenomenology’s* section on Master and Slave.

My proposed reading of the Master-Slave section takes *desire* as its starting-point. Before the ‘life-and-death struggle’ that Hegel refers to takes place, individuals are solely *desiring* beings; and *issues of desire* (rather than *issues of recognition*) occasion the struggle. What might such issues be? A *merely desiring* being – a being for whom, by definition, *recognition is meaningless* – can encounter another such being only as a mortal threat. Recognition being meaningless, scenarios of communication are excluded. Scenarios of communication being excluded, the other’s behaviour (owing to its uncertainty and unpredictability) menaces the *merely desiring* individual’s life. Because attack is (famously) the best means of defence, the life-and-death struggle between self-consciousnesses commences: ‘each seeks the death of the other’ (*PS* 187). Notice that *what* each other seeks is

¹⁷ See H. Arendt *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958) p. 247; *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1973) p. 211.

the other's death (and not the other's recognition). The struggle is motivated by a desire not *for recognition* but *for survival*

In order to trace the emergence of recognition in Hegel's account, the process of 'life-and-death struggle' (PS 187) must be pictured in, so to say, a frame-by-frame fashion. Two self-consciousnesses (Hegel has stipulated) seek one-another's death and, thereby, risk their lives. A normal or necessary accompaniment of *risking ones life* is fear – upon which Hegel writes eloquently. The significance of *fear* in Hegel's argument becomes apparent, I suggest, when we take his remarks as referring to a critical moment in the envisaged struggle – namely, the moment when the *self-consciousness who will become Master* stands poised to deliver a final, mortal blow to the *self-consciousness who will become Slave* – and when we attempt to picture this moment (“phenomenologically”) from the standpoint the self-consciousness who is on the verge of defeat. At this moment, the *self-consciousness who will become Master* counts, for the *self-consciousness who will become Slave*, as *nothing but* the pure and unqualified intention of his – the prospective Slave's – death. The *fear* that is attendant on mortal combat is intensified to an 'absolute' (PS 194, 195) pitch. In Hegel's words:

this consciousness [the self-consciousness who will become Slave] has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being [*ganzes Wesen*] has been seized by death; for it has experienced fear of death, the absolute Master. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. (PS 194)

Proverbially, the fear of death (the 'absolute Master') is the beginning of wisdom – or of self-awareness. Hegel, I suggest, indicates the manner in which this self-awareness arises. It arises because *what* the Master-to-be intends is the death of the vanquished self-consciousness; and because, in comprehending this intention, the vanquished self-consciousness learns – or reads off - *what* he or she is. In the scenario that I have (“phenomenologically”) imagined, the self-consciousness who is on the brink of defeat has no alternative but to comprehend this intention. The eyes

of the murderous other are upon the losing self-consciousness, who is transfixed in the other's gaze. Staring into the eyes of the triumphant other, the self-consciousness who is on the brink of defeat acquires self-awareness or self-knowledge. This awareness or knowledge extends to everything that the self-consciousness is. (It extends to his or her 'whole being'.) The self-consciousness who is on the brink of defeat becomes aware of possessing not merely *desiring* but *recognitive* potentials. Were combatants in the 'life-and-death struggle' to *continue as* merely desiring beings, the death of one self-consciousness at the hands of the other would be certain. Since, however, one self-consciousness (but only one self-consciousness) has progressed in awareness, a different outcome is possible. Communicative (or recognitive) action, and quick thinking, defuses the crisis. Through a cry of "I submit", the mortal blow that the victor threatens is averted. One-sided and unequal recognition comes into existence. And history begins.

My reconstruction of the 'life-and-death struggle' leaves a question – *at least* one question – unanswered. If, through fear, the *self-consciousness who will become Slave* becomes capable of recognitive action, how does the *self-consciousness who will become Master* know how to respond? At the start of the fight, both self-consciousnesses are *merely desiring* self-consciousnesses and, in the reconstruction that I have proposed, only *one* self-consciousness (the self-consciousness who becomes Slave) has advanced beyond this mark. I suggest that the Master is capable of accepting the Slave's offer of submission because, in the figure of the submissive Slave, the Master sees an image of desire that is (through the Slave's servitude) wonderously fulfilled (see *PS* 190). Precisely because recognition is *terra incognita* for the Master, he or she is incapable of foreseeing the twists and turns and ironic inversions that 'one-sided and unequal' recognition entails.

Standing back, I note that my "anti-heroic" reconstruction represents an alternative interpretation of the *Phenomenology's* Master-Slave passage that may be set alongside the more usual "struggle for recognition" reading. My account has, I claim, at least as strong a textual entitlement as the reading that I seek to replace. Not the least of my reconstruction's conceptual advantages is that it traces, *munus* vicious circularity or question-begging presuppositions, a process – in effect, a process of unintended consequences – through which recognition, and thereby history, makes its first appearance.

4. *The course of history*

If history opens with a cry of submission, it opens with an action that both affirms and denies recognition. It founds, or inaugurates, a form of recognition whose contradictory and ‘one-sided’ character history labours to overcome. I have suggested that, for Hegel, history is a “work” that transforms *recognition that is one-sided* into *recognition that is mutual*. The course of history is the story of this protracted and (I suggest) uncertain transformation.

I employ the term “uncertain” in order to underline two points. One is that, in a history of recognition, individuals think and act in ways that are conceivable given the form of recognition (or pattern of recognition) that then obtains. If history is indeed a “work”, as my formulation has suggested, it is a “work” that goes forward with no clear understanding of what its final goal may be. *Recognition* and *freedom* are, indeed, historical threads that individuals may follow. Whether the threads of *recognition* and *freedom* are followed, however, and how (if they are followed) they are understood, remains unpredictable or ‘undeducible’¹⁸ in any given case.

My second point is that the course of history is uncertain because, in the *Phenomenology* at any rate, Hegelian history unfolds without the guarantee of a global subject who might guide history towards approved goals. In Hegel’s later *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where a ‘cunning of reason [*List der Vernunft*]’ ensures that actions performed have a predetermined outcome,¹⁹ the notion of a global subject is present. In the *Phenomenology*’s conception of history, by contrast, the notion of a global subject – and of a ‘cunning of reason’ – plays no part.²⁰

In the light of these points, what becomes of Hegel’s claim – a claim that I have echoed in my remarks on recognition – that history has a unitary and coherent sense? If historical actions are ‘undeducible’, and if a global subject is non-existent or absent, can history plausibly be seen as having a *beginning* – and an *end*, during which the historian (the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*)

¹⁸ Kojeve’s term: *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* pp. 8, 43.

¹⁹ On ‘cunning of reason’, see Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975) p. 89.

²⁰ In the Preface of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel refers to ‘cunning [*List*]’ in terms that appear to recall (or anticipate) the idea of a cunning of reason. But this is too little to justify the ascription to Hegel of a providence-based or (as it were) a “teleological” conception of history in *PS*.

writes? My claim in response to such questions is that the course of history may be uncertain and yet the notion of a unitary sense may be sustained. A writer who (for example) recounts a *narrative* may view individual actions as uncertain, or ‘undeducible’, and yet regard such actions as forming a coherent whole. A writer who writes *retrospectively* about events may, without relying on a providential ‘cunning of reason’, see events as culminating in the present – a present in which the historian writes. Hegel’s claim may not be that *history has been guided towards such-and-such an outcome*. It may be that, *this outcome having occurred*, the historian may retrospectively chart the uncertain and ‘undeducible’ process which has *this particular present* as its result.

I have claimed that, according to the *Phenomenology*, history has a unitary sense – namely, a sense that turns on the intertwined themes of freedom and recognition. I have further claimed that, without imperilling the notion of a unitary sense, the *Phenomenology* may jettison the notion of a global subject and acknowledge that the course of history is radically uncertain. This latter claim has repercussions for the way in which Hegel’s most famous concept – the concept of ‘spirit [*Geist*]’ – is to be viewed. In chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, headed ‘Spirit’, Hegel presents a selective account of European history from the period of the Ancient Greek city-state, or *polis*, up to and including his own post French-Revolutionary days. Here, I do not intend to explore Hegel’s term ‘spirit’ in its numerous contexts and meanings. However, I raise the question of whether Hegel’s chapter-title invites us to think of ‘spirit’ as a global subject at work in and through European historical events.

Commentators on Hegel have been reluctant to think of Hegelian ‘spirit’ on the model of a self-sufficient and transcendent God. In Taylor’s view, for example, ‘spirit or subjectivity is necessarily embodied’; *Geist* ‘cannot exist separately from the universe which he sustains and in which he manifests himself’.²¹ Although incapable of existing ‘independently of men’, however, *Geist* ‘is not reducible to man; he is not identical with the human spirit’.²² Harris to the same effect declares that spirit – or, rather, ‘absolute’ spirit – ‘cannot be simply reduced to the historic interactions of atomically finite

²¹ C. Taylor *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979) p. 23.

²² Taylor p. 11.

mortals'.²³ Setting aside Harris's reference to *atomic* individuality, a question remains about whether the notion of 'spirit' in Hegel might not free itself from the last vestiges of global subjectivity and subsist solely in interactive or recognitive terms. In a striking passage from the *Phenomenology*,²⁴ Hegel presents the notion of 'spirit' in just such recognitive terms. He tells us that interaction between self-consciousness – and he appears to mean *mutually recognitive* interaction between self-consciousnesses – is 'what spirit is [*was der Geist ist*]' (PS 177). If spirit *is* interaction and recognition, the term as understood by Hegel dispenses with global subjectivity and invites us to think of something closer to (in Montesquieu's famous title) a "spirit of the laws".

In the present paper, I make no attempt to explore in detail Hegel's account of the course that European history follows. Some schematic comments are required, however, in order to carry my discussion forward to questions concerning Hegelian history's last days.

Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* presents Ancient Greek social life as one where 'self-consciousness has not yet received its due particularity' (PS 464) and where unreflective custom obtains. In Ancient Rome, the rule of custom is ended and individuals stand counterposed to an 'external', and thereby alienating, social world (PS 484). The upshot of Ancient Roman alienation is, in Hegel's view, Christianity: in compensation for alienation in *this* world (the world of 'actual consciousness'), self-consciousness imagines an other-worldly *beyond* (a world of 'pure consciousness') where perfection allegedly obtains (PS 485).²⁵ In the post-Roman world, 'spirit constructs for itself not merely *a* world but a world that is double, divided and self-opposed' (PS 486). Through this duplication, self-consciousness increases the alienation that it sought to escape.

I stress the theme of Christianity's separation between *this* world and a *beyond* because Hegel structures the remainder of *Phenomenology* chapter

²³ Harris (as quoted in footnote 3, above) p. 248.

²⁴ A passage foregrounded by Williams in his *Recognition*, p. 14.

²⁵ Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* is, in effect, an elaboration of this part of PS 484-5.

VI with reference to it. In the early-modern world,²⁶ he proposes, alienation is at its height: contradiction obtains not merely *between* this world and the beyond but *within* each realm. In *this* world – the world of “practice” – there emerges a conflict between *politics* (which is supposedly public-spirited) and *economics* (which turns on considerations of self-interest). In the other-worldly *beyond* – the world of “theory” – there emerges a battle in the heavens between enlightenment and religious belief. With eighteenth-century French society increasingly in mind, Hegel describes a social world whose parts presuppose but, at the same time, undermine one another. In such a society, says Hegel, each ‘self-differentiating moment’ comes on the scene ‘as sheer uproar and a violent struggle with an antithesis’ (PS 546). Permeated with alienation, French society as pictured by Hegel is on-course to revolutionary upheaval. Such an upheaval will not leave unscathed the alienating separation between ‘*pure* consciousness’ and ‘*actual* consciousness – or between “theory” and “practice” – that is at the source of Christian culture. In Hegel’s words, which lead on to his discussion of the French Revolution, ‘the two worlds [of *pure* and *actual* consciousness] are reconciled and heaven is transplanted to earth below’ (PS 581).

5. *History’s end*

I have claimed that, according to the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, history ends when mutual recognition is achieved. And I have further claimed that, in Hegel’s view, mutual recognition comes into being through the French Revolution. Both of these claims appear to be belied by the circumstance that, in the section of the *Phenomenology* which describes the events of the French Revolution (PS 528-95), Hegel unfolds a scenario at least as violently horrific as anything that his Master-Slave passage contains.

Hegel’s account Revolutionary events runs (very schematically) as follows. ‘Absolute freedom’ – French Revolutionary freedom – ‘ascends the throne of the world without any power being able to resist it’ (PS 585). As a result of absolute freedom’s coming to power, ‘the various spiritual masses [*geistigen Massen*] and restricted life of the individual have been done away with’ (PS 587). (Hegel’s meaning is, I take it, that absolute freedom has set

²⁶ *Phenomenology* ch. VI passes over the Middle Ages in silence. The section on the ‘Unhappy Consciousness’ in ch. IV (PS 207-30) can, however, be read as a (misplaced) discussion of the Dark Ages/Mediaeval period.

aside the various *social institutions* under which individuals bear role-definitions of this or that kind.²⁷) In a situation where absolute freedom prevails, the Revolution confronts the task of constitution-building. However, ‘the interaction of consciousness itself’ – an ‘interaction’ in which absolute freedom consists – ‘lets nothing break loose from itself as a *free object*’ (PS 588) and the work of constitution-building is self-defeating. A constitution which might distinguish between a *legislature* and an *executive* and a *judiciary* could only set up a renewed arrangement of *spiritual masses*, and thereby a new alienation. Unable to perform either a ‘positive work’ (the work of constitution-building) or an effective ‘deed’, there is left to Revolutionary self-consciousness – says Hegel – only ‘*negative action*’ and ‘the *fury* of destruction’ (PS 589). And the Terror begins. In the bloodbath of the Terror, where a *government* counts merely as a temporarily-victorious *faction*, and where ‘*being suspected...takes the place, or has the significance, of being guilty*’ (PS 591), the Revolution consumes itself. At the end of the Terror, when the bloodbath has ended, ‘the organisation of spiritual masses or spheres to which the plurality of individual consciousnesses are assigned...takes place once more. These individuals who have felt the fear of death...again submit to negation and distinctions, arrange themselves in the various spheres, and return to an apportioned and a limited task, but thereby to their substantial reality’ (PS 593).

What are we to make of this? In his student days at Tubingen, Hegel famously welcomed the outbreak of the French Revolution. Although later, responding to the Terror, he wrote (in a letter to Schelling) of ‘the infamy of Robespierre and his followers’,²⁸ he hoped – in the years which followed – for a French-inspired extension of political representation in Germany. In 1806, Hegel (then completing the *Phenomenology*) welcomed Napoleon’s victory over Prussia in the battle of Jena. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, dating from his Berlin period, the French Revolution continues to be referred to as a ‘glorious dawn’.²⁹ In short, Hegel does not (unlike

²⁷ PS 492 compares *spiritual masses* with the natural elements (or natural masses) of Air, Water, Fire and Earth. It is difficult not to read the paragraph as suggesting that social institutions *per se* involve an inertialisation, or reification, of recognitive relations. We may note that, where social institutions exist, the *particular individual* becomes the bearer of one or more *universal role-definitions*. The point is worth noting because, as will become apparent, it has bearing on the *Phenomenology*’s understanding of alienation.

²⁸ Quoted in B. Cullen *Hegel’s Social and Political Thought* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1979) p. 31.

²⁹ See Hegel *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications 1956) p. 447.

numerous of his contemporaries) respond to the Terror by adopting an anti-Revolutionary stance. The *Phenomenology's* black and horrific paragraphs on the Terror (PS 589-92) are best described, I suggest, not an expression of outrage but as an acknowledgement of the worst that Revolutionary freedom may bring. Although Hegel tells us that, in the Terror, 'self-consciousness learns what absolute [i.e. Revolutionary] freedom in itself is' (PS 592), his claim is not that absolute freedom is *only* Terror; nor is it that our knowledge of the Terror is a sufficient reason for setting the challenges of absolute freedom aside.

In the remainder of the present paper, I attempt to draw out something of the richness and intrinsic interest of 'absolute freedom' as a category in Hegel's thinking. I propose (a) that Hegel sees absolute freedom as overcoming crucial historical problems; and that (b) absolute freedom's capacity to overcome such problems turns on mutual recognition. This done, I emphasise a respect in which the argument of the *Phenomenology* remains open-ended.

(a) In the *Phenomenology's* section on the French Revolution, Hegel introduces 'absolute freedom' in terms which recollect – and which mesh together with – his account of history. In the first place, such freedom is 'individual' freedom (PS 584). In contrast to Ancient Greece, where custom prevailed, an absolutely free society is a society of individuals. In the second place, absolute freedom inhabits a social world that 'solely spiritual' (PS 584) – which is to say, solely recognitive. In contrast to Ancient Rome, where individuality encountered an alienating and 'external' social world (PS 484), a society of absolute freedom is a society of intrinsically *social* rather than intrinsically *atomic* individuals. (Another way of stating the same point is to say that absolute freedom is not merely "negative" liberty.) In the third place, absolutely free self-consciousness 'grasps the fact that its certainty of itself is the essence of all the spiritual masses or spheres [*geistigen Massen*], of the real as well as the supersensible world' (PS 584). That is to say, absolute freedom transcends the 'double, divided and self-opposed' (PS 486) mode of life in which Christian culture is immersed. It overcomes the separation between "theory" (or 'pure consciousness') and "practice" (or 'actual consciousness') that has become taken for granted in the post-Roman social world. In addition to this, insofar as absolute freedom overcomes a world of *spiritual masses*, it overcomes the historically widespread assumption that *social institutions* – to each of which, a specific

set of role-definitions is attached – are needful, if cognitive relations are to exist.³⁰

(b) These claims regarding absolute freedom may be made, I suggest, because absolute freedom involves mutual recognition. Here, I comment briefly on three points concerning mutual recognition which bear on the issue of how absolute freedom *is* or *is not* to be seen.

My first point is to the effect that mutual recognition allows *individuals* to experience their social world as cognitive and interactive – which is to say, in Hegel’s meaning of the term, *solely spiritual*. Since (as I have suggested) recognition is *constitutive*, an individual’s freedom is *reinforced* – rather than *constrained* or *limited* – by recognition which he or she receives. On a terrain of mutual recognition, self-consciousnesses are seen as forming a ‘unity’ with one another and, at the same time, as enjoying ‘perfect freedom and independence’ (PS 177). Hegel’s phrase ‘solely spiritual [*nur Geistiges*]’ (PS 584) declares – rightly or wrongly – that French Revolutionary freedom is not to be seen in merely “negative” terms.

My second point concerns an issue that I have touched upon, but not discussed, in the present paper. I merely note the point here. The issue is that of theory’s relation to practice: insofar as absolute freedom sees itself as the ‘essence’ of the ‘real as well as the supersensible world’ (PS 584), it holds out promise of healing Christian culture’s theory/practice split. On a terrain of mutual recognition – I propose, but do not here argue – this split is overcome: *truthful theory* (or, in Hegel’s term ‘science’) becomes possible when, and only when, *mutually cognitive practice* obtains. Applying this line of thought to the *Phenomenology’s* conception of history, Hegel (I suggest) thinks of the French Revolution as a *window of opportunity* – a window of opportunity for comprehension – that remains open only when mutual recognition is in play.

My third point concerns the relation of *universality* and *particularity*. If, indeed, Hegel’s term *spiritual masses* refers to social institutions, and if (as I have suggested in passing) social institutions involve role-definitions, a question arises about whether the universal and the particular aspects of an individual’s existence are adequately integrated. If an individual is a

³⁰ See note 27, above.

particular being who upholds a *universal* role-definition,³¹ does such an individual determine him or herself in a unitary and non-alienated way? The question is of importance because Hegel, both in his pre-*Phenomenology* writings³² and in the *Philosophy of Right*, advocates role-defined forms of social existence. The *Phenomenology* is a different case because *what* is recognized in a mutually recognitive world is not a universal role-definition that an individual may bear but an individual's self-determining freedom. What is recognized is not merely freedom as a universal idea but the particular, self-determining actions in which freedom consists. If absolute freedom transcends (through its rootedness in mutual recognition) alienations inherent in institutional existence, it offers to transcend social arrangements that are recommended elsewhere in Hegel's work.

Standing back from my comments on how Hegel's term 'absolute freedom' may be understood, I emphasise the open-ended nature of the argument that (I have claimed) the *Phenomenology* presents.

In order to do so, I return to paragraph in the *Phenomenology* where the theme of 'absolute freedom' is introduced. Where absolute is in play, Hegel tells us, there exists a 'general will' – a general will which is not a mere 'empty thought' but a 'real will, the will of all *individuals* as such' (PS 584). Where such a will is present, 'each, undivided by the whole, always does everything, and what appears to be done by the whole is the direct and conscious deed of each' (PS 584). These formulations are breathtaking because – I claim – they admit of no interpretation other than in terms of crowd activity. A group where 'each...always does everything' is in effect a *group-in-fusion* (Sartre) – that is to say, a group whose actions are regulated not through role-definitions of one sort or another but through group interaction.³³ What Hegel has in mind is, I suggest, 'those episodes of the French Revolution' when the 'mass intervention, in streets and markets, of ordinary men and women' was the decisive political factor.³⁴ In such

³¹ Why *universal* role-definitions? By "universal", in the present connection, I mean applicable to a range of individuals alike.

³² In his *System of Ethical Life*, for example, or in his 1805-6 lecture-outline on the philosophy of spirit.

³³ J.-P. Sartre *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: New Left Books 1976) pp. 351-63. Sartre's *Critique* can be read as an extensive reworking of the *Phenomenology's* paragraphs on the French Revolution.

³⁴ The words are those of G. Rude in his *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1972) p. 9.

episodes, we may say, an interactive unity between the *universal* (the group, the crowd) and the *particular* (the interacting individual) obtains. A situation where ‘each...always does everything’ is (to recall a phrase employed earlier in the *Phenomenology*) one where an ‘I that is We and We that is I’ (PS 177) exists. Should we conclude that it is a situation of mutual recognition? Is it on the streets of revolutionary Paris that, in Hegel’s view, mutual recognition first appears?

I suggest that this is the case. In addition, however, I suggest that absolute freedom (or mutual recognition) no more exists *only* in the form of crowd-activity than it exists *only* in the form of Terror. Standing back, I propose that, at the culminating point in the *Phenomenology*’s argument, Hegel finds himself without conceptual room to manoeuvre. An alienated world of *spiritual masses* lacks the stability and inertia which was supposed to be such a world’s strength: each moment in such a world exists in ‘violent struggle with its antithesis’ (PS 546), and the upshot is revolution. By contrast, the crowd-activity of the Revolution’s early days turns its back on *spiritual masses* but is on-course to the ‘negative action’ and ‘fury of destruction’ that the Terror exemplifies. The Terror itself results in (as we have seen) the emergence of an ‘organisation of spiritual “masses” or spheres to which the plurality of consciousnesses are assigned...take place once more’ (PS 593). In short, all three terms in Hegel’s social equation – alienation, crowd-activity and Terror – threaten to collapse towards one another. The social exit-scenario that the *Phenomenology* envisages – one where mutually recognitive freedom is achieved in the ‘unreal world [*Unwirklichkeit*]’ of German philosophy (PS 395) – succeeds only if thought is substituted for actuality and if (what is on the face of it impossible) the republic of letters counts as more than a renewed spiritual spheres or masses. Stated differently, mutually recognitive freedom finds itself without a social instantiation.

Following the French Revolution, Hegel observes in the *Phenomenology*’s Preface, the ‘various shapes and forms’ of social life – in effect, *social institutions* such as those which the Revolution opposed – ‘develop’ and ‘take place afresh’ (PS 12). Whether Hegel welcomes this historical turn of events, or writes of it with a sense of disappointed promise, it is impossible to say. What is certain is that, as the tide of Revolutionary mutual recognition ebbs, the argument of the *Phenomenology* (as here

interpreted) is thrown into crisis. In place of counting as an ‘exoteric’ (*PH* 13) text, received by an audience or ‘public’ (*PS* 71) who are mutually recognitive, the *Phenomenology* acquires the status of an esoteric work.³⁵ The figure of mutual recognition is referred forward in time, and is conceived by Young (“Left”) Hegelianism as a to-be-sought-after form of free association. When Marx characterises French Revolutionary freedom as after all merely negative,³⁶ and when (in contrast) he declares that in communist society ‘the free development of each’ is ‘the condition of the free development of all’,³⁷ he is – my paper has demonstrated – reworking deeply Hegelian themes.

³⁵ Bruno Bauer’s semi-ironic ‘The Trumpet of the Last Judgement over Hegel the Antichrist’ – see L. Stepelevich (ed.) *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983) pp. 177-86 – launched the notion of an “esoteric” Hegel. In the present paper, and in my ‘Hegel on Theory and Practice’ (see note 5, above), I have in effect suggested that, in alienated world, Hegel admits *only* of an esoteric reading.

³⁶ This is what I take Marx to mean when, writing with French Revolutionary constitution-building in mind, he criticises the notion of #liberty...of man as an isolated monad who is withdrawn into himself’: K. Marx *Early Writings*, ed. by L. Colletti (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1975) p. 229.

³⁷ K. Marx and F. Engels *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books) p. 105.

