

# The Nature of the Self

Recognition in the Form  
of Right and Morality

by

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## Contents

The Nature of the Self. Recognition in the form of Right and Morality .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1 The Human Self as the Unity of Mind and Body .....	12
Introduction .....	12
The immediate unity of mind and body .....	15
Consciousness: looking for the independence of the outside world .....	17
Self-consciousness .....	22
Is the transition from the natural into the legal status possible?	28
Self-consciousness and the legal status .....	31
Violence, power and the legal status .....	33
Self-consciousness and the overcoming of exclusion .....	37
The Lord/Bondsman relation .....	42
The historical reality of the lord/bondsman relation .....	44
The Unhappy Consciousness .....	48
Reason .....	53
The mind/ body unity as an historical reality .....	58
Chapter 2 The Greek World: The Origin of the First Self .....	60
Introduction .....	60
The polis as the unity of the Human and Divine Law .....	61
The abstract work of art: the representation of the pure self in the public domain .....	63
The polis as a harmonic unity .....	68
Repression of the deed: the living work of art .....	69
The representation of the deed: the spiritual work of art .....	71
Conclusion .....	75
Retrospection .....	77
The Roman Empire as the result of the Greek World .....	79
Chapter 3 The Realm of Culture: The Genesis of the Second Self	81
Introduction .....	81

The Fall of the Roman Empire and the experience of the person	81
The genesis of the moral individual	83
The Embodiment of the “pure Being” in the real Individual: the self-conscious reality of the Unhappy Consciousness	87
The meaning of the moral individual in the objective world	89
The realization of the moral individual in the objective world: the process of culture	90
The absolute Freedom: the second self	96
Retrospection	97
Chapter 4 The Realm of Morality: Making the Third Self Explicit	100
Introduction	100
The point of departure of the Realm of Morality: the Rousseauian Reflection	101
The inner contradiction of the Napoleonic Law: the Kantian Reflection	102
The sublation of the inner contradiction	104
The Hegelian reflection on the Napoleonic Law: Conscience as the origin of the third self	105
The development of Conscience	106
a. Conscience as the Unhappy Consciousness that repeats Consciousness	106
b. Conscience as the Unhappy Consciousness that repeats Self-consciousness	107
Conscience that becomes aware of itself as Unhappy Consciousness	110
The meaning of the “absolute Spirit”	113
Retrospection	115
Chapter 5 Honneth’s Criticism of Hegel’s Metaphysics	118
Introduction	118
The “Phenomenology of Spirit” and the question of “The Nature of the Self”	118
The relation of mind and body as the primordial form of recognition	121
The development of freedom from the inside perspective	121
The transition from a monological into a dialogical approach	122
The absolute Spirit as the presupposition of the dialogical relation	123
Absolute Spirit and metaphysics	126

Religion . . . . .	129
Recognition between metaphysics and empiricism . . . . .	131
Honneth's project in relation to the Phenomenology of Spirit and the Philosophy of Right . . . . .	134
 Chapter 6 The program of the Philosophy of Right as elaboration of the Phenomenology's project . . . . .	136
Introduction . . . . .	136
The conceptual design of the Philosophy of Right . . . . .	137
The abstract Right as the formal Notion of the first self . . . . .	139
Morality as the formal notion of the second self . . . . .	141
Conscience as the formal unity of right and morality . . . . .	142
Conscience in the 'Philosophy of Right' vis-à-vis conscience in the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' . . . . .	142
The formal unity of the three forms of the self following from the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' . . . . .	143
The actualization of the Human Self . . . . .	148
 Chapter 7 The Family: The Institutional House of the First Self .	150
Introduction . . . . .	150
The species life of animals . . . . .	150
The family in the Philosophy of Right: animal life in the form of freedom . . . . .	151
The social organism of the family vis-à-vis the conceptual framework of the 'Philosophy of Right' and the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' . . . . .	152
The education of the children in the family of the revised 'Philosophy of Right' . . . . .	155
a. The socialization of the child in the contingent tradition of the family . . . . .	155
b. The process in which the child develops awareness of the contingence of the family tradition . . . . .	158
Retrospection . . . . .	164
Excursus: The Development of the Child to a Real Person in Confrontation with Jürgen Habermas's Reception of the Stages of Moral Consciousness developed by Lawrence Kohlberg . . .	166
 Chapter 8 The Civil Society: Developing the Institutional House of the Second Self . . . . .	176
Introduction . . . . .	176

The development of the second self's embodiment in the 'Philosophy of Right': civil society . . . . .	176
The process of Culture in Civil Society . . . . .	178
Culture in the socialized production System as part of the System of Needs . . . . .	182
Institutionalizing the second self: the community of moral subjects . . . . .	187
Criticism of the development of civil society in the light of the Phenomenology of Spirit . . . . .	190
The revised concept of Culture in Civil Society . . . . .	193
The free market and the exclusion of individuals . . . . .	198
The market and the moral subject . . . . .	199
Moral subjectivity and lifelong partnership . . . . .	200
The market and the good life . . . . .	205
Retrospection . . . . .	209
 Chapter 9 The State: The Embodiment of the Third Self . . . . .	 211
Introduction . . . . .	211
The development of the third self's embodiment in the 'Philosophy of Right': the State . . . . .	211
Criticizing the state of the 'Philosophy of Right' in the light of the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' . . . . .	216
The revision of the citizen and the Monarch . . . . .	217
The development of the third self as the presupposition of the revised state . . . . .	220
The Government . . . . .	223
Jurisdiction . . . . .	224
International Law . . . . .	225
The political cooperation between nation states . . . . .	227
 Concluding remarks . . . . .	 232
Literature . . . . .	235
Author index . . . . .	238
Subject index . . . . .	240

# The Nature of the Self. Recognition in the form of Right and Morality

## Introduction

This book is about the nature of the human self; i. e., it is not focussed on sources that contributed to a specific historical reception of the self<sup>1</sup>, but rather, aims at a systematic, conceptual development of the self. However, it is not self-evident that the human self has a nature, nor that this nature can be systematically developed. Moreover, the turn of phrase “nature of the self” is ambiguous: It can concern a nature that is opposed to culture, or a nature that expresses an essence that transcends variations in time, i. e., a logical nature.

The first option, the nature of the human self that is opposed to culture, is the position that is represented by the gene-theory. The gene-theory conceives of the human self as a living organism that is comparable with other living organisms. In this context, the conception of the human self coincides with the insight into the specific human genes. This approach, like all scientific theories, does not satisfy as a philosophical conception of the nature of the self. The scientific framework of the gene-theory, i. e., the framework that defines the meaning of a living organism, is not, itself, subject of the gene-theory: The theory is not self-referential, it cannot explain its own existence, but is, rather, presupposed to what is accepted as existence. Since the scientific practice cannot be excluded from the nature of the human self, the problem has to be solved of how the living organism can be combined with the ability to conceptualize itself as a living organism. In other words, the philosophical conception of the nature of the self has to solve the mind/body problem: How can the human self be understood as the unity of mind and body without reducing the mind to the body, or vice versa?

In **Chapter 1**, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>2</sup> is introduced as a systematic philosophical attempt to develop the unity between mind and

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1 Therefore, this book is not meant as a replacement of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*, (Harvard University Press, 2005) but rather, as its completion.

2 Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford, 1977.

body (preserving, as well, the own nature of the mind as the body). To conceptualize the immediate unity between mind and body, Hegel makes use of the metaphor of the *lordship/bondsman relation*: The lord represents the mind that also has a body; the bondsman represents the body that also has a mind. In this way, the mind/body problem is reformulated as the problem of how to contemplate the adequate unity of lord and bondsman.

The transformation of mind/body into lordship/bondsman is not just a matter of changing terms. The transformation incorporates the Aristotelian insight that the adequate unity between mind and body can only be conceived of at the level of society. For Aristotle, the human self, the *animal rationale*, essentially is a social self, a self that lives in the framework of a state. This is reflected in the metaphor of the lordship/bondsman relation that makes it clear that the body of the mind essentially is a social organism. A mind that also has a body is a mind that is objectified in a social organism. Conversely, the body that also has a mind is a body that is part of a social organism. In this respect, lordship and bondsman are Hegel's translation of the Aristotelian *logos* and *state*.

Hegel, however, transcends the Aristotelian conceptual framework when the relation between lord and bondsman is understood as a relation of recognition.<sup>3</sup> By this move he combines the social (communitarian) freedom of Aristotle with the subjective (libertarian) freedom of Kant.<sup>4</sup> If the lord is recognized by the bondsman, he not only represents the unity of the social organism (the lord represents the law of the state that is actualized by the actions of the bondsman), but also the subjective freedom of the bondsman (the bondsman is free insofar as he is the "lord" of his body: He recognizes this freedom in the lord of the social organism, i. e., he recognizes this lord as the objective reality of his own freedom).

The basic idea of recognition follows from the observation that it is impossible to conceive of the unity of mind and body at the level of the

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3 Paul Ricoeur remarks in the introduction of his book, *The Course of Recognition*: "My investigation arose from a sense of perplexity having to do with the semantic status of the very term *recognition* on the plane of philosophical discourse. It is a fact that no theory of recognition worthy of the name exists in the way that one or more theories of knowledge exist." (Preface, p. ix) In fact, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a systematic theory of recognition.

4 Cf. Williams (1997): "My thesis is that the concept of recognition is crucial to Hegel's project of mediating modern individualist subjective freedom (Kant) and classical ethical substance (Plato, Aristotle)." (p. 114/5).

individual. If the mind is understood as the autonomy of the individual, this autonomy gets lost when the individual is also a corporeal individual. The individual remains dependent on his body; the death of the body implies the death of the entire individual. The autonomy of the mind is only thinkable at a social level, i. e., as the law (*logos*) of the social organism. The lord represents the autonomy of an immortal individual: the individual that is institutionalized as a social organism. In himself, the individual is not autonomous, i. e., he is not the “lord” of his body. But insofar as the individual can recognize his individual mind/body relation in the social mind/body relation, i. e., as the lord that represents the autonomy of the social organism that is actualized by the actions of the bondsmen, his autonomy is no longer an illusion.

The lordship/bondsman relation is the elementary model of the free society. The lord represents the human autonomy, the human capability to transcend the (instinctual) laws of nature and replace them by the human law of the state. The bondsman represents the citizens who actualize the human autonomy by observing the human law as it positively appears. Therefore, the lordship/bondsman model combines two forms of recognition. The first form I will call the *horizontal recognition* that concerns the relation between the citizens. This first form of recognition is, in principle, symmetrical: In their observation of the same law, the citizens are free and equal. The *horizontal recognition* stands for the dimension of *right*. The second form I will call the *vertical recognition* that concerns the relation of the citizens to the lord, i. e., to the representation of their autonomy. This relation, in principle, is a-symmetrical because it is the relation in which the citizens, as corporeal individuals, are related to their absolute essence (that will be developed as their conscience). The *vertical recognition* stands for the dimension of *morality*, the dimension in which the citizens are absolutely unequal: In this dimension, they are non-exchangeable, unique individuals. Therefore, the lordship/ bondsman relation is the elementary model of the unity of *right* and *morality*, the unity of *horizontal* and *vertical recognition*.

The immediate form of the lordship/bondsman relation is not inadequate because the relation between lord and bondsman is a-symmetrical (the *vertical recognition* is fundamentally a-symmetric) but rather, because it is still characterized by a discrepancy between the inside and outside perspective. When it is possible, from an outside perspective, to describe the Aristotelian state in terms of the lordship/bondsman relation, this does not imply that it is also possible from the inside perspective. From the inside perspective, the citizens cannot make a difference be-



tween themselves and the lord because they immediately identify themselves with the lord. The lord is only real as the contingent (traditional) law of the state. Therefore, the citizens are neither aware of the *vertical recognition* (in their consciousness there is no room for other traditional laws) nor of the *horizontal recognition* (the citizens are absorbed by their social roles: These are not mediated by free choice). Only when the discrepancy between the inside and outside perspectives can be overcome does the lordship/bondsman model cease to be an external attempt to understand the unity of mind and body. The external perspective from which the model is formulated must become part of the model itself. We, i. e., the author and the readers of this book, are also human beings in which mind and body are united. Therefore, if we, from a meta point of view, design a model to understand the unity between mind and body, we must recognize in the model all the meta considerations we made about the unity of mind and body. Only under that condition, can we accept the model as a necessary one.

The process in which the inside and outside perspectives are brought together results in the development of the consciousness of the bondsman. The consciousness of the bondsman becomes more and more aware of the reality in which he is living. This process is discussed in the subsequent part of **Chapter 1**.

Since the consciousness of the bondsman is already a moment of the entirety of the social organism he is living in, the development of this consciousness can be reconstructed as a necessary process. At the moment, however, that the consciousness wants to know what is the content of the social law, it is not possible to determine this content by a necessary deduction: The content of the social organism is contingent (Aristotle's model of the state is compatible with a multitude of traditions). Insofar as the consciousness of the bondsman is already a moment of the social organism all the time, this social organism is a contingent organism, i. e. an organism that has historical existence.

Not all historical organisms can be identified as organisms in which the consciousness of the bondsman is living. The institutional differentiation of the organism must enable this consciousness to pass through the development in which it will become aware of the reality it is living in. Hegel identifies this social organism as the polis of the ancient Greek world. **Chapter 2** elaborates how the polis can be conceived of as the historical social organism in which the immediate unity of *right* and *morality*, i. e., the immediate unity of *horizontal* and *vertical recognition*, is objectified.

Since the institutions of the polis allow a learning process in which the consciousness of the polis experiences the contingent content of the law, the Greek world will, sooner or later, decline. Ultimately, the consciousness cannot recognize the social organism, precisely because it is a contingent organism, as the expression of its moral identity. What remains is a social order that is one-sidedly characterized by the *horizontal recognition of right*. Hegel identifies this order as the *Roman Empire* that derives its unity from the property right of *Roman Law*. The Roman citizens are the formal persons who recognize one another as free and equal.

Hegel calls the formal person of the *Roman Law* the *first self*. For the first time, the human self has actualized itself as an autonomous self. The actions of the person are not determined by tradition, but by the free will of the persons themselves. In the *first self*, the unity of mind and body for the first time appears as an individual. The person is the free will (cf. mind) that is embodied in the social organism of the family (cf. body). The person is the “lord” of the family whose labor is oriented to the reproduction of the family.

Although the *first self* is a necessary stage in the development of the nature of the self (the human self must transcend tradition, otherwise the independence of his mind is not done justice) the adequate unity of mind and body is not yet attained. The persons are atomized selves, that lack a common “lord” who represents their moral identity.<sup>5</sup> They only practically express their moral identity in the private domain, i. e., in the labor of the family. Therefore, it remains coincidental whether or not the persons can actualize their moral identity. The *Roman Empire* has no inner harmony, a shared definition of good life, and will sooner or later decline.

**Chapter 3** discusses the *Realm of Culture* that covers a period in European history that begins after the decline of the *Roman Empire*, and ends with the *French Revolution*, i. e., it is the period of the *Middle Ages*. After the *first self* has been developed in the ancient Greek and Roman world, the *second self* is developed in the *Middle Ages*. In the *second self*, the dimension of *right* is reunited with the dimension of *morality*. In the *second self*, the immediate unity of *right* and *morality* of the Greek world is transformed in the self-conscious unity of *right* and *morality*.

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5 Although the Roman Emperor (the “lord and master of the world” [292/3]) is “the titanic self-consciousness that thinks of itself as being an actual living god” (293) he is a person like the others, a formal self, that has no real power over the content, i. e., over the substantial world of which he is supposed to be the ruler.

The idea of the *second self* is simple: To prevent the risk that the social law is not in harmony with the moral identity of the person, the *second self* wants to make the social law the expression of his moral identity. This attempt seems to be reasonable when the moral identity is “cultivated”: It is no longer the moral identity that is immediately given and that belongs to the private domain, but it has been socialized and rationalized and has lost its particular character. The *second self* wants to make his cultivated moral identity the content of the social law.

According to Hegel, the “absolute freedom” of the citizen of the *French Revolution* is the historical reality of the *second self*: He does not accept any tradition and demands that the social law is in absolutely accordance with his enlightened moral self. It is, however, impossible to meet the demand of the citizen, not only because all citizens want to do the same and cannot accept that the other citizens determine the content of the social law, but also because the citizens contradict themselves: Since the moral identity transcends all positive determinedness, they have to reject any positive shape of the law. Therefore, the subjectivism of the *French Revolution* necessarily ends in the revolutionary terror in which the citizens try to prevent each other’s attempt to actualize the social law.

Also, although the *second self* cannot, evidently, be the adequate actualization of the unity of *right* and *morality*, it is certainly a necessary stage in the development of the nature of the self. A free, moral self cannot tolerate a given social organism; his freedom is only real if this organism expresses his moral identity. The terror of the *French Revolution*, however, has shown what are the bloody consequences of a policy that is immediately moralized. This is understood by Jean Jacques Rousseau when he differentiates between the social law and its transcendent moral legitimation. The social law is legitimate insofar as it can be considered as the expression of the “*volonté générale*”, the general will. This concept remains transcendent because it must accurately be distinguished from the “*volonté de tous*”, the will of all, that can be positively deduced from the real will of the citizens.

**Chapter 4** discusses Hegel’s reception of this Rousseauian reflection on the *French Revolution* in the Morality-Chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The problem is, on the one hand, how to preserve the transcendent character of the general will, and on the other hand, at the same time understand the existing legal order as a manifestation of the general will. Hegel rejects Kant’s solution because of his distinction between a noumenal and a phenomenal world. Since the general will is situated in the noumenal world, and the legal order in the phenomenal world, the problem

is only shifted: how to think of the relation between the noumenal and the phenomenal world. Hegel's own solution is elaborated as the *third self*, the conscientious individual.

The *third self* (as reflection on the *French Revolution*) belongs to the modern world (Hegel's own era) and pretends to express the adequate relation between *right* and *morality*. The conscientious individual is related to the transcendent dimension of the *absolute Spirit*, i. e., to the absolute essence of his freedom. This relation reflects the citizen's relation to the general will in Rousseau. At the same time, the conscientious individual tries to actualize his moral freedom in the objective world, i. e., in the social order in which he is living. Therefore, the adequate relation between *right* and *morality* is conceived of as the relation between *objective* and *absolute Spirit*.

In **Chapter 5** the three forms of the self are compared to the three forms of recognition that Axel Honneth distinguishes in "The Struggle for Recognition".<sup>6</sup> The comparison is complicated because Honneth relates to the young Hegel whose concept of recognition, according to Honneth, is influenced by the "presuppositions of the metaphysical tradition" and has to be reconstructed "in the light of empirical social psychology".<sup>7</sup> It is examined which meaning Honneth's arguments have for the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The conclusion is that the three forms of the self are not metaphysical in the sense of Honneth.

It took the social experience of the Ancient, the Mediaeval and the Modern world to be able to formulate the human self adequately. The insight into the *third self* presupposes the insight into the *first* and *second self*. The individual who wants to acquire adequate insight into the human self has to repeat, at an individual level, the social experience of European history. In other words, this individual must participate in a social organism whose institutions allow the repetition of this social experience. In **Chapter 6**, it is argued that it is exactly this consideration that is the basis of the project of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.<sup>8</sup> The *ethical life* that is developed in this work as the unity of *Family*, *civil Society* and *State*, is an attempt to integrate the development of the *first*, *second* and *third self* in the institutional framework of one social organism. *Fam-*

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6 Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1995.

7 Ibidem, p. 68.

8 Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford University Press 1967.

ily, *Corporation* and *State* are presented as the adequate institutional embodiment of the *first*, *second* and *third self*.

**Chapter 7, 8 and 9** consist of a detailed survey of the way in which the development of, respectively, the *first*, *second* and *third self* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, returns in the development of, respectively, *family*, *civil society* and *state* in the *Philosophy of Right*. My thesis is that the logical structure of the *Philosophy of Right* cannot be understood if one does not acknowledge that it has been Hegel's intention to resume the three periods of European history (Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modernity) with the three corresponding forms of the self as the constituting logical moments of ethical life. From Hegel's viewpoint, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right* do not represent different positions. The historical order is only transformed into a systematic order.

Curiously enough, however, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not only a criterion for the positive understanding of the *Philosophy of Right's* composition, but at the same time, a criterion to criticize this composition. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the concept of conscience is reduced in comparison with the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Since the *Philosophy of Right* discusses the *objective Spirit*, the dimension of the *religious conscience* is explicitly excluded. The content of conscience is reduced to what can be actualized at the (historical) level of *objective Spirit*. This reduction has huge consequences for all three domains of ethical life. The ethical life of the family is reduced to natural life in the form of freedom; the freedom of civil society is reduced to economic freedom; the ethical life of the state is reduced to the mono-cultural nation state.

**Chapter 7, 8 and 9** not only reconstruct Hegel's composition of the *Philosophy of Right*, but also the version that would result from a position in which conscience is not reduced. In this version, consequently, also the three domains of ethical life are not reduced: It offers room to multi-culturality, to moral and political freedom and to states that are embedded in a system of international law. In this version, the relation between *absolute* and *objective Spirit* is conceived of as the relation between human rights and democracy. My thesis is that this alternative version of the *Philosophy of Right*, based on the full consequences of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, elaborates a conceptual framework that is better suitable for the understanding of contemporary multi-cultural and globalized society than other proposals, especially the popular theories of Jürgen Habermas<sup>9</sup> and John Rawls.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung*, Frankfurt/M., 1992.

My interpretation of the *Philosophy of Right* is in accordance with Robert Williams when he brings to the light “the concept of recognition as crucial to the systematic unity of the book” (p.27).<sup>11</sup> I also agree with R. Williams when he states that “Hegel does not fundamentally change his position concerning recognition ...” (p.2) and observes in this respect a continuity between the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*. The distinction that Williams makes between a self-subverting form of recognition (“clearly demonstrated in the case of master and slave”) and an “affirmative mutual recognition in the other that is central to ethical life” (characterizing the “mature” Hegel), however, has to be re-futed.

Williams illustrates his distinction between two forms of recognition in his criticism of Alexandre Kojève: “although Kojève made the struggle for recognition central to his interpretation of Hegel, the irony is that Kojève’s work obscures and distorts Hegel’s concept of recognition. However, for Hegel, recognition is a general concept of intersubjectivity, wider than master and slave. [...] In contrast to Kojève, Hegel’s master and slave is but an important first phase of unequal recognition that *must* and *can* be transcended.” (p.10) Williams is certainly right that Kojève’s concept of recognition is distorted (“Kojève thinks the concept of recognition primarily on the basis of an ontology of negation and finitude” (p.11) and that the recognition that is expressed in the metaphor of master and slave has to be developed. But he is mistaken if he thinks that this development ultimately implies the overcoming of “inequality” in the concept of recognition. As mentioned before, recognition remains characterized by its two (“horizontal” and “vertical”) dimensions. Ultimately, the “unequality” remains preserved in the a-symmetry between *absolute* and *objective Spirit*.

I share Williams’ criticism of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth when he remarks: “Unfortunately, in Honneth’s and Habermas’s interpretation, the early Hegel is sharply distinguished from the mature Hegel. [...] Honneth repeats Habermas’s line that in Hegel’s mature thought, the concept of recognition is displaced by a monological conception of self-reflective subjectivity” (p.15).<sup>12</sup> He rightly supports Ludwig Siep’s

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10 John Rawls, *Laws of Peoples*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

11 Robert Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*, University of California Press, 1997.

12 Honneth (1995) remarks: “In this sense, the new (and, methodologically speaking, certainly superior), conception found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* repre-

reading of Hegel: “Siep believes recognition is important for Hegel’s practical philosophy because it allows Hegel to renew the classical tradition of practical philosophy on a postmodern, postliberal, intersubjective-social basis” (p.21). But, I think that his conclusion needs some specification: “This reading supports Habermas’s contention that recognition is an important counter-discourse of modernity” (p.21) Hegel’s concept of recognition is superior to the concept of recognition as it is elaborated in Habermas’s *Theory of communicative Action*. Habermas has never succeeded in the reconciliation between the domain of recognition and the domain of nature. His new paradigm remains characterized by a Kantian dichotomy: the dichotomy between truth and objectivity, the “object of knowledge” and the “object of experience”, intersubjectivity and nature.<sup>13</sup>

Also Williams’s criticism of Michael Theunissen needs some specification and correction. Theunissen “does attempt to show that intersubjectivity is derivative from a pre-social, or transcendental monological subject, and that objective *Geist*, while supposedly the consciousness of individuals, nevertheless comes to have self-consciousness and self-relation, thereby creating an asymmetry and a heteronomous relation between objective *Geist*, ethical substance and independent individuals. This asymmetry finds expression in a pantheistic conception of the substance/accidents scheme: Self-conscious, self-relating objective *Geist*, is identified with absolute *Geist*, the ultimate subject that is, at the same time, ethical substance. In this scheme, individuals are reduced from independent free beings to mere accidents of substance” (p.16).

Williams is right when he defends the intersubjectivity of Hegel’s project against Theunissen (“I will show that Hegel by no means restricts recognition to abstract right and property, but clearly indicates that the concept of recognition is the general structure of ethical life”, p.17).

sents, in effect, a fundamental turning-point in the course of Hegel’s thought. As a result, the possibility of returning to the most compelling of his earlier intuitions, the still incomplete model of the ‘struggle for recognition’, is blocked.” (p. 63) Later on he adds: “Neither in Hegel nor in Mead does one find a systematic consideration of those forms of disrespect that, as negative equivalents for the corresponding relations of recognition, could enable social actors to realize that they are being denied recognition.” (p. 93) I will show that, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the ‘denied recognition’ appears in the form of the *Unhappy Consciousness*. The *Unhappy Consciousness* is not overcome by a ‘struggle for recognition’, but rather by a process of experience in which the consciousness becomes aware of the social source of his unhappiness.

13 Jürgen Habermas, “Wahrheitstheorien”, in: *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt/M., 1984, pp. 127–186.

But, in my opinion, the central point is that Theunissen identifies *objective* and *absolute Spirit*. Precisely because Hegel wants to solve the problem of how to devise a community of independent individuals, he has to introduce the *absolute Spirit* in distinction from the *objective Spirit*. The a-symmetrical relation between the individuals and the *absolute Spirit* grounds the intersubjectivity between individuals that have a symmetrical relation to one another at the level of the *objective Spirit*. The identification of *objective* and *absolute Spirit* totally ignores Hegel's project.

The revised *Philosophy of Right* raises the same questions as Rawls's *Political Liberalism*<sup>14</sup>: how to think of a community of persons with different moral opinions. It shows, however, that Rawls's conception of the moral person remains unreflected. The concept of the moral person already presupposes a structure of basic institutions all the time. An atomized moral person is a contradiction in itself; the attempt to construct an "overlapping consensus" between atomized moral persons is totally superfluous. The fundamental failure in Rawls's and Habermas's theory converge: neither of them has developed an adequate conception of the unity between mind and body. They conceptualize a human self without identity.

The revision of the *Philosophy of Right* makes it possible to give an answer to the justified criticism of the *Philosophy of Right*, itself. In reading Hegel's analysis of *civil society*, for example, Marx's criticism of Hegel and his alleged alliance with capitalism becomes obvious. The revision, however, will clarify that Hegel, especially in his analysis of the *System of Needs*, betrays his own principles and is too much impressed by the contingent reality he is confronted with. Also Siep's criticism that Hegel one-sidedly remains committed to the primacy of the general and the Christian culture is overcome in the revised version in which the moral individual transcends the labor system, and in which multi-culturality gets the room it deserves.<sup>15</sup>

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14 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, 1993: "... how is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?". (p. 4).

15 Ludwig Siep, "Recognition between Individuals and Cultures", [manuscript].