

The Blackwell Guide to
Continental
Philosophy

Edited by

Robert C. Solomon

and

David Sherman

The Blackwell Guide to
Continental Philosophy

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Introduction

Robert C. Solomon

“Continental philosophy” is the curious name used to designate philosophy – or, rather, a large number of philosophies – on the continent of Europe over the past two centuries or so, roughly since the work of Immanuel Kant at the very end of the eighteenth century. Since it is a label that is more appropriate overseas than in Europe itself, it is bound to generate a certain amount of confusion. For instance, apart from such well-known names as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre, there is no agreed-upon group of philosophers who form the continental canon. Nor does “continental philosophy” refer to any single identifiable kind of philosophy, style, concern, or tradition. Indeed, what is called “continental philosophy” includes a good number of literary theorists and writers, sociologists, social critics, psychoanalysts, and political activists, many of whom would not normally be considered (nor would they have considered themselves) philosophers. Much less does “continental philosophy” mark off a particular piece of territory. What goes on under that label is now being produced at a much more prodigious rate in the United Kingdom, the Americas, and Australasia than in Europe, where much of the philosophizing has turned to linguistic matters and more “analytic” issues. Nor does the label mark off any particular temperament or method. Hegel and Kierkegaard, just to name two of the earlier authors discussed in this *Guide*, share very little of either temperament or method other than a few fancy terms (most of them ironically adopted by Kierkegaard to mock the Hegelian project). The existentialists reject the idealists, and the postmodernists reject the existentialists. Indeed, it too often seems that the primary function of the phrase “continental philosophy” is to mark off an artificial battle line between so-called “analytic” and “continental” philosophers, where the only thing that is clear is that the two are hostile, suspicious, or at best merely tolerant of each other.

Let us begin this *Guide*, therefore, with the stipulation that no such antagonism is intended here. What will be discussed in this book cuts across continents and cultures and is concerned with epistemology, metaphysics, and the nature and structure of language (usually identified with analytic philosophy), as well as with sharp social criticism and “meaning of life” sorts of questions. Moreover, the tradition in which continental philosophy gets its bearings (and often rejects in turn) is the same “Western” philosophical tradition that motivates much of analytic philosophy. It

begins with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and continues on to Kant. The language, the questions, and the concerns are for the most part shared, and even the much-touted differences in style tend to be caricatures. Obscure writing is neither definitive of nor exclusive to continental philosophers, nor is literary flair.

Within the recognized realm of continental philosophy, there is at least one divide that is as abysmal and sometimes as vicious as the more celebrated divide between “analytic” and “continental” philosophy. That is the polemical divide between “post-modern” and what one might call “pre-postmodern” or, some would say, “modern” European philosophers and philosophy. To be sure, one cannot intelligibly speak about the more notable philosophers of France in the latter part of the twentieth century without being steeped in the work of the German philosophers of the century or so preceding (though many do try). Nietzsche and Heidegger in particular are typically cited as important precursors of philosophical postmodernism, if not as postmodern themselves. Nevertheless, most of the philosophers and philosophies that (quite conscientiously) call themselves “postmodern” or “poststructuralist” are heavily indebted to those that precede them. In much more than a nominal sense, there could be no postmodern or poststructuralist philosophy if there were not first the rich legacy of modern philosophy.

Philosophically, these differences turn on the Enlightenment aspiration to develop a universal philosophy, including an all-embracing concept of knowledge, a universal notion of human nature, and a “cosmopolitan” ethics and political philosophy. All of this might be clumsily summarized in terms of the traditional philosophical notion of “truth.” G. W. F. Hegel, who in many ways epitomizes “pre-postmodern” or “modern” European philosophy, announced as the uncompromising goal of both his own work and philosophy through the ages “philosophical truth.” This was not to be confused with more ordinary matters of truth (for example, the facts of history or the propositions of mathematics) but was an all-embracing, comprehensive, and “absolute” conception of truth peculiar to philosophy (and some would say, to *his* philosophy). But it was Hegel’s “deconstruction” of the Cartesian tradition and the Kantian self that opened the door to poststructuralism.

Many of the postmoderns, by contrast, disparage and eschew the notion of truth altogether, often reaching back to Friedrich Nietzsche, the last great philosopher of the nineteenth century and arguably the first postmodern philosopher, who in some of his more outrageous pronouncements declared truth to be nothing more than “a mobile army of metaphors” and “the more useful errors of mankind.” In Nietzsche’s case, and in the case of many of the French postmodernists, the attack on truth is first of all an attack on dogmatism, an attack on the uncritical certainty that has been the goal of too much of philosophy and (especially) theology. This attack on truth, however, is much more than a skeptical response. At its most vehement, the attack on truth represents the rejection of the very idea of truth together with a rejection of the Enlightenment thinking that embodies it. It is also a rejection of traditional epistemology and a rejection of metaphysics (or, at least, a dogged resistance to metaphysics, which Jacques Derrida admits cannot be wholly overcome). It suggests, at least, a rejection of the very idea of “human nature,” a rejection of any attempt to formulate a “totalizing” theory of ethics or politics, and a reconsideration (if not a rejection) of the very nature of philosophy.

The attack on truth leads, predictably, to a serious difference of style as well – or, rather, a difference in the very conception of what it is to “do” philosophy. Again, Nietzsche’s style is often taken as a model. In contrast to the heavy academic writing of Kant and Hegel in particular, the buoyancy, the enthusiasm, and the excesses of Nietzsche’s writings are taken as exemplary. He rarely pursues a topic for more than a few pages. Often his insights are captured in aphorisms, short pithy comments that are self-consciously ambiguous and “pregnant” with multiple interpretations. He can often be seen as taking up positions and making claims that are at odds with one another, or even in flat contradiction. He loves puns. He polemicalizes. He makes exaggerated claims and uses extravagant language that is easily misunderstood. And, so too, in the late twentieth century, a generation of French philosophers and their Francophile acolytes thoroughly enjoyed themselves “outraging the philistines” (as the earlier French troublemaker Theophile Gautier once insisted), playing with and twisting language, engaging in extravagant and sometimes suspicious etymological investigations (here following Martin Heidegger as well as Nietzsche), occasionally basing a deep philosophical point on a pun, “deconstructing” virtually all foundational claims, and relegating a good many philosophical matters to the vicissitudes of politics and power.

As a matter of convenience, we might say that continental philosophy begins at the start of the nineteenth century, just before the death of Kant. (“Modern” continental philosophy, in its usual designation, begins with Descartes and covers the rich period up to and including Kant.) The dominant figure in early continental philosophy, as we said, was Hegel, but Hegel was immediately preceded and surrounded by an impressive array of “post-Kantian” philosophers who, like Kant, considered themselves “Idealists” of one kind or another. The names of Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling are particularly prominent, but there were many others besides. Arthur Schopenhauer, perhaps Hegel’s most vocal nemesis, became the darling of the Romantics in mid-century. Other mid-century critics included the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and a promising student journalist at the University of Berlin, the young Karl Marx. The second half of the century was also remarkably rich with philosophical talent, typically spilling over into (and borrowing from) the social sciences. Psychologists such as Franz Brentano, biologically minded metaphysicians such as Edward Hartman and C. D. Lange, philosophy-minded physicists such as Ernst Mach, and “hermeneutical” philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey are exemplary. And then there was Nietzsche, perhaps the best known and currently most celebrated of all pre-postmodern philosophers – although, as I mentioned, he is often considered a postmodern as well.

The turn of the twentieth century was also marked by a rich variety of philosophical efforts, but perhaps the most definitive was the work of a Moravian mathematician, Edmund Husserl, who in his efforts to understand the nature of necessary truth and turn philosophy into a “rigorous science” established what came to be seen as an exciting new way of doing philosophy, *phenomenology*. He was followed and profoundly chastened by his student Martin Heidegger, who in turn inspired both a generation of Frenchmen, notably Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and latter-day hermeneutics, exemplified by Hans-Georg Gadamer. And that, with the war’s end, started to bring the “Kant to phenomenology” phase of continental

philosophy to an end. But, of course, the history of ideas is never so neat, and what followed is even more difficult to summarize, if only because it is so recent and still, in many ways, undigested. What is clear is that German philosophy took a radical turn, or continued a radical turn it had taken with the rise to power of the Nazis in the early 1930s. Some of those philosophers, soon to be known as the “logical positivists,” emigrated and set their mark on analytic philosophy, following an earlier refugee from the Continent, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Others, however, turned their philosophical talents to desperately needed social criticism, trying to find out how modern life and German culture had conspired to create Hitler and many other social ills.

Thus critical theory and the Frankfurt School were born. The Frankfurt School theorists, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, for instance, challenged and questioned the whole of modern culture and problematized the Enlightenment (without ever completely rejecting it). They vigorously attacked Heidegger’s flirtation with the Nazis as well as his philosophy, and made radical suggestions for the transformation of society. The next generation of Frankfurt School theorists, notably Jürgen Habermas, continued the critique, but with a more sympathetic eye to the Enlightenment. Habermas famously confronted the more conservative hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, but then he in turn faced more contemporary dangers and opponents, particularly in the new postmodernists. Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, and many others besides, sky-rocketed into prominence in France and then throughout Europe and abroad. They turned on traditional philosophy in a radical new way and suggested that not just philosophy but modern culture itself were shot through with contradictions and insupportable pretensions. They were followed in turn by a new generation of feminist philosophers, deeply influenced but also deeply critical of Simone de Beauvoir, who deserves a great deal of credit for having more or less invented French feminism. The new French feminists provided a further radical twist to the ongoing critique of just about everything.

That is a brief history, grossly oversimplified, of the period and people we will be covering in this book. It could be written in many different ways, highlighting many different figures and movements. But in addition to that history, there is another, the history of the reception of these authors abroad. To understand what continental philosophy is, it is not only necessary to understand its internal tensions and “dialectic,” but also the distortions wrought by its supposed antagonism with what is now called “mainstream philosophy” in the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, briefly considering the history of continental philosophy just in the USA, the UK, and Australasia, one can discern three rather distinctive periods.

First, beginning just after the Second World War and continuing well into the 1960s, European philosophers were mainly ignored and, when mentioned at all, treated as objects of suspicion and with considerable disdain. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who became famous as “existentialists” because of their novels and popular writings, were for the most part excluded from the philosophy curriculum as having little of philosophical interest to offer. (Sartre was the source of considerable amusement to English moral philosophers such as A. J. Ayer, who simply interpreted Sartre’s admittedly polemical notion of “absolute freedom” as making the

absurd and therefore instantly dismissible claim that one can do absolutely anything that one chooses.) Analytic icon Gilbert Ryle of Oxford once attended a conference with French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in the spirit of *détente* politely asked him whether he did not think that they were “after the same thing.” Ryle responded, in a tone that expressed the general attitude of Anglo-American analytic philosophy toward the continental philosophy of the time, “I hope not!”

Hegel and Heidegger were quoted only as the butt of abuse. For instance, Hans Reichenbach quotes a few lines of Heidegger in his book, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, as an example of impossibly obscure and “meaningless” philosophy. (As a dubious tribute to Hegel and his British followers, the leading British journal *Mind* once prefaced an issue with a blank page, identifying it as a picture of “the Absolute.”) Continental philosophy – mainly Camus and Sartre – was increasingly taught in colleges and universities because of student demand. But it had virtually no philosophical respectability.

The second period, beginning somewhere in the 1970s, was commonly described as a period of “*rapprochement*” and mutual understanding. Books on the great European philosophers tried to explain their ideas in “analytic” terms (that is, clearly and straightforwardly). J. N. Findlay boldly tried to introduce Hegel to an analytic audience, and he was not (as he would have been) simply ignored or insulted. Arthur Danto, following Walter Kaufmann’s artful de-Nazification of Nietzsche, wrote *Nietzsche as Philosopher*, making it very clear from the start that what he meant was Nietzsche as an *analytic* philosopher. Respectable books from respectable presses started to appear on Heidegger, Schopenhauer, and Husserl and on “phenomenology.” Sartre was taken seriously. The links between Husserl and the great logician Gottlob Frege were appreciated and investigated. Articles started to appear on such topics as the similarities between G. W. F. Hegel and Harvard logician W. V. O. Quine. Graduate students started to write Ph.D. dissertations on prominent figures and topics in continental philosophy, and were not immediately relegated to the unemployment lines. Mainstream philosophers mentioned, quoted, and sometimes even wrote about those philosophers, who were no longer considered “on the other side,” just a little bit exotic and obscure. It was a honeymoon period, and the label “continental philosophy” (as opposed to more specific topics, such as “phenomenology and existentialism”) was rarely, if ever, used.

Then, in the 1980s, something new appeared. Jean-Paul Sartre had just died. He had been the great man (even Charles de Gaulle was quoted as saying, “Sartre, he is France”), but after his death he was quickly and oddly eclipsed in Paris. (In 1980, Vincent Descombes published a book on *Modern French Philosophy* that did not even give Sartre a chapter.) Overseas and across the channel, there was some interest in what would follow, but the rapidity with which philosophical fashions appeared and disappeared tried the patience of all but the very dedicated. For a brief period, “structuralism” was announced as the new way of thinking that would change the world. Some new names appeared: the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, a philosopher–historian named Michel Foucault, a peculiar psychoanalyst named Jacques Lacan, a mad Marxist named Louis Althusser, and a brilliant writer and literary critic named Roland Barthe. It was an odd assortment of characters and (as had happened with the “existentialist movement” several decades earlier) one by one

the “structuralists” refused the title. As a movement, it quickly disappeared beneath the waves. What replaced it inevitably became known (more abroad than in France) as “poststructuralism.” The new philosophical exports from France were bewildering in their variety, in their language, and in their posturing. It was also the age of the “tele-prof,” ever new and more flamboyant philosophical stars, who burned brightly for a week – or sometimes a season – on television and then disappeared from the scene.

What finally emerged was the phenomenon of postmodernism. Its biggest star, soon eclipsed in Paris but enduring in the USA and elsewhere, was Jacques Derrida. “Deconstruction” became the coinage of the day. It was picked up with a vengeance by literary theorists, and with its Marxist underpinnings soon took on a lively role in politics as well, including, especially, academic politics. Deconstruction was picked up as a weapon by those who had an axe to grind with philosophy, and they were many. Whereas Derrida rightly prided himself on his extensive mastery of the Western philosophical tradition, many of his followers simply used him to attack that same tradition, knowing very little about it. Derrida may have questioned but he never wholly rejected metaphysics, noting that we are trapped in “the tradition” and we cannot escape it. At the same time, Michel Foucault was reborn as a star himself, no longer a philosophical or social historian or a structuralist, but now a powerful advocate of the neo-Nietzschean thesis that it is power that governs the success and failure of “discourses,” and “truth” is but an illusion.

“Continental philosophy” was now set against traditional and “analytic” philosophy, but not as before, when European philosophy since Kant was for the most part simply unknown, unread, and therefore unappreciated. Now continental philosophy was often presented as the antidote to the disease of “mainstream” philosophy in Anglo-American philosophy. *Rapprochement* came to an end. Derrida was *denounced* when he came up for an award at the University of Cambridge. Some demagogic conservative philosophers have even found in continental philosophy a not so subtle substitute for now-defunct communism, a new and dangerous enemy to be eradicated, ignoring the fact that much of postmodernism is for the most part quietist and politically uncommitted.

This, unfortunately, is the environment in which we publish this *Guide*. It is our purpose, accordingly, to show students and other readers the enormous range and the fascinating variety of philosophical positions and philosophers who are all too often simply lumped together and dismissed without a sympathetic reading.

In what follows, we will try to present the highlights of what is now called “continental philosophy” by friend and foe alike. Needless to say, we have not been able to be all-inclusive. We apologize if one or another of a reader’s favorite philosophers failed to make the cut. We might also note, to be frank, that despite the fact that the accepted rubric of our subject matter is “continental philosophy,” the usual focus (and thus the focus in this *Guide*) is almost entirely on France and Germany. Denmark is usually mentioned only because of the existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. The Netherlands, despite the occasional reference to the great Spinoza in the seventeenth century, might never be mentioned at all: so, too, Belgium, the rest of Scandinavia, Portugal and Spain (despite the legacy of Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset), and Italy, despite the prominence of Vico and Croce, and a great many contem-

porary philosophers of note. Meanwhile, Eastern Europe is considered some other world, and while it must be admitted that the Balkans have had more than their fair share of troubles in the twentieth century, their philosophical exclusion is by no means therefore justified. Nevertheless, we have tended to be conservative rather than adventurous in our choice of figures to be covered, mainly due to space limitations. We have stuck for the most part with the rarely disputed French and German luminaries who have, for the most part, come to define what is intended by “continental philosophy.” While we can imagine many other philosophers who might have been included, we cannot easily imagine the omission of any of the philosophers who we have included.

As for more current figures – that is, what is happening *now* – we can only say that we are in no position to make any judgments. Such pronouncements to the effect that one or another current philosopher is “the most important of his/her generation” is (in retrospect) much more likely to be laughable than plausible. (Sometimes it is the generation as a whole, and occasionally even the entire century, that after a time disappears from view.) If we had put together this *Guide* in the early 1970s, we might have made the mistake of making some (in retrospect) very foolish claims about the world-historical significance of structuralism. If we had put the *Guide* together in the early 1990s, we might have made some perhaps ultimately (in retrospect) foolish claims about the significance of postmodernism. (We might have even cited Baudrillard as a simulacrum of some philosophical significance.)

What is in evidence now are some semblances of what might turn out to be a short-lived movement with the utterly predictable and not entirely serious name of “post-postmodernism.” But who knows? The French dominated much of the late twentieth century in philosophy; or, at any rate, attracted the lion’s share of attention and notoriety, just as the Germans did in the nineteenth century and in the last century, before two devastating and self-eviscerating wars. Perhaps it would be good if the focus were now to shift to some other part of Europe or, better, some other part of the world where philosophy remains as vibrant but is a little less used to the spotlight. Or, even better, the “transcendental pretense” of one small corner of the world projecting its prejudices on humanity as whole might come to an end. One of the virtues of continental philosophy and postmodernism in particular is its openness to multiculturalism and (at its best) its tolerance for other ways of thinking and doing philosophy. We can preserve cultural and ideological differences while nevertheless appreciating them, recognizing them for exactly what they are. They are differences within a single but pluralistic species whose greatest virtues as well as vices can be attributed to those swollen cerebral hemispheres that make philosophy not only possible but necessary.

Chapter 1

G. W. F. Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit

Stephen Houlgate

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) is one of the greatest (though also least studied) philosophers of the Western tradition. His thought spawned both Marxism and existentialism, and exercised considerable influence on many of the major philosophers of the twentieth century, including Dewey, Gadamer, Sartre, Derrida, and Habermas. It is true that many regard Hegel's work as too difficult and obscure to merit close scrutiny. Those who do take the trouble to study his work carefully, however, encounter a thinker whose richness and subtlety, in my view, is matched only by that of Plato, Aristotle and Kant.

Hegel was born in Stuttgart on August 27, 1770. He studied philosophy and theology at Tübingen, becoming friends there with Hölderlin and Schelling, and sharing their enthusiasm for Rousseau, Kant, and (initially at least) the French Revolution. From 1793 to 1800 he worked as a house tutor, first in Berne and then in Frankfurt-am-Main, and wrote several manuscripts on religion and love that remained unpublished until the early twentieth century. In 1801 he moved to Jena where, under the influence of Schelling, he began to develop his philosophical system. The distinctive introduction to that system, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which contains the famous analyses of the master/slave relation, the unhappy consciousness, and Sophocles' *Antigone*, was published in 1807. While he was rector of a school in Nuremberg, Hegel completed the first part of the system itself, the monumental *Science of Logic* (published in three volumes from 1812 to 1816).

In 1816 Hegel became professor of philosophy at Heidelberg and in 1817 published, under the title *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, an outline of his whole system, including, in addition to logic, the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of mind or spirit (*Geist*). During his years in Berlin from 1818 to 1831, Hegel then published the works and delivered the lectures that would make him the most famous and influential philosopher in Germany. The *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* appeared in 1820, and two further, revised editions of the *Encyclopaedia* were published in 1827 and 1830. When he died on November 14, 1831, Hegel left behind not only his wife, Marie, and two sons, Karl and Immanuel, but also a body of thought that would inspire and provoke numerous philosophers, theologians, and

social theorists right up to the present day (despite being neglected by much of the philosophical establishment in Britain and the USA).

Freedom and Mutual Recognition

Hegel has been treated by some philosophers not just with indifference, but with outright hostility and suspicion. Karl Popper, for example, famously counted him (with Plato and Marx) among the most potent enemies of the “open society.” Such a judgment is, however, hard to sustain when one reads carefully what Hegel actually wrote and taught. His texts and lectures make it clear that he was in fact an unceasing advocate of freedom and rationality, and no friend of totalitarianism or obscurantism.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that freedom entails exercising choice, owning property, and working to satisfy one’s manifold needs. Freedom cannot, however, consist simply in doing what I want, because it is secured only when it is *recognized* by other individuals. I may insist that I am free to take possession of the objects of my desire, but I can do so in fact only when others acknowledge my right to own those objects.

For Hegel, rights are first established by the very concept of freedom itself, since that concept determines what freedom requires, and whatever *must* fall to me as a free being thereby constitutes my *right*. As a free being I have the right to own property or engage in work, whether or not others recognize that right. That is why I can demand of others that they respect my rights, whenever they fail to do so; if rights did not come first, they could not command recognition in this way. Yet the recognition afforded me by others is what allows me to *exercise* my rights. I may well have the inalienable right to own property, but I can become the rightful owner of this or that particular house only if others respect my right to do so. Accordingly, as Robert Williams puts it, “right is not actual or objective until it is recognized.”¹

For Hegel, therefore, concrete human freedom is inseparable from recognition. We demand that our freedom be recognized as our right, and we need the respect of others if our freedom is to be more than a dream. Furthermore, the very idea to which we appeal – that right commands recognition – requires of us that we respect the rights and freedoms of others in turn. To be free, therefore, we must be accorded recognition by those whose freedom we ourselves are bound to recognize: true freedom requires mutual respect and recognition between people. As Hegel states in the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind* (1830), “I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free.”²

According to Hegel, human beings recognize and respect one another as free within communities, such as the estate or corporation in which they work and the state of which they are citizens. Hegel does, therefore, believe that human beings are born to live in the state, as many of his critics have charged. Yet this is not because he “worships” the state in any sinister, totalitarian manner. It is because he understands the state – at least when it is free and rational – to be the community in which mutual recognition is guaranteed both by the civic disposition of people and by the

law. Hegel sets out the close connection between recognition, law and the state in these lines from the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind*:

What dominates in the State is the spirit of the people, custom, and law. There man is recognized [*anerkannt*] and treated as a *rational* being, as free, as a person; and the individual, on his side, makes himself worthy of this recognition by overcoming the natural state of his self-consciousness and obeying a universal, the will that is in essence and actuality will, the *law*; he behaves, therefore, towards others in a manner that is universally valid, recognizing them – as he wishes others to recognize him – as free, as persons.³

States often fail to guarantee that citizens respect the law and one another, and often violate citizens' rights themselves. A rational state, however, is one that is held together precisely by a common respect for the law that requires people to show respect for one another.

Consciousness, Self-Consciousness, and Desire

Recognition may be found within society and the state, but is there anything to prevent our withdrawal from society, which would enable us to enjoy the untrammelled freedom of the hermit and so be relieved of the need to gain recognition? Physically, there may be nothing to prevent us; but in so doing, Hegel believes, we would deprive ourselves of the opportunity to acquire genuine *self-consciousness*. According to Hegel, I cannot fully understand who I am, if I remain alone by myself with only the objects of nature to attend to. I gain a proper consciousness of myself only when my self-understanding is recognized and confirmed by others.

This is not to say that in the absence of such recognition I would lack any self-awareness whatsoever. For Hegel, simple consciousness of an object, such as a house or tree, already incorporates the awareness that the object is distinct from *me*. Similarly, all perception brings with it the awareness that I, as perceiver, am capable of error. Yet such self-awareness falls short of articulated, objective self-consciousness and self-understanding: the latter, Hegel argues, requires the recognition by others of who we are. As Loewenberg (or, rather, his fictional creation, Hardith) puts it, Hegel thus “discover[s] an incipient social consciousness within the very bosom of self-consciousness.”⁴ A hermit's life is ultimately not for us: for we are born to understand who we are, and that means that we are born to be social and political beings. To learn precisely why this is the case, we must turn to Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

The *Phenomenology* describes, in prose both tortuous and elegant, the development of consciousness from its most primitive or naïve form – which Hegel names “sensuous certainty” – to its most mature form – self-knowing spirit or “absolute knowing.” This development is to be understood not as historical, but as *logical*. The book does not examine how human consciousness has actually changed through time into modern self-understanding, but shows how certain general “shapes” of consciousness necessarily transform themselves, because of their very structure, into

further shapes. The development traced by Hegel overlaps in certain parts with European history (for example, in the analysis of “Stoic” consciousness), but what gives Hegel’s book its unity is the fact that it renders explicit what is logically entailed by being conscious.

Consciousness develops, according to Hegel, as it takes cognizance of what is implicit in its own experience, though initially hidden from view. Sensuous certainty, with which Hegel begins, is the form of consciousness that takes itself to be aware of the simple, immediate presence of things. It eschews all mediating categories and is quite certain in its own mind that what it has before it is nothing but *this, here, now* in all its simplicity. Its experience reveals, however, that what it is actually conscious of is not just simple immediacy after all, but a complex unity of different moments: a “now” that stretches back in time through other nows and a “here” that is spatially related to other heres. When sensuous consciousness accepts that its object is more complex than it initially thought, it transforms itself logically into a new shape: perception. This is not to say that every historical individual wedded to the immediate certainties of sensory experience will accept that he or she is actually conscious of complex objects of perception. It is to argue that the more developed standpoint of perception is *logically* implicit in that of sense certainty, and that those wedded to immediate sensuous certainty should acknowledge that the objects they relate to are more complex than they first think.

How does this process of logical development lead to self-consciousness? Hegel argues that perception grasps its object as a complex unity of many “nows” and many “heres,” but that it cannot decide whether the true nature of the object lies more in its unity or in its multiplicity. Perception ends up distinguishing between the manifold character and the *inner* unity of the object. As soon as it regards its object as having an inner unity, however, it ceases to be mere perception and becomes understanding. Understanding then learns that the inner unity of the thing actually consists in lawfulness, reason, and life. When this happens, Hegel claims, understanding proves to be not just consciousness of objects, but also *self-consciousness* – because it finds in its objects the very qualities that constitute its own nature. Prior to its mutation into self-consciousness, understanding already incorporates an element of self-understanding: it knows that it is precisely the *understanding*, rather than mere perception, of objects. Yet only when it encounters in the objects themselves nothing but qualities belonging to itself does it come to be self-consciousness in the full sense, that is, consciousness of itself *above all else*.

Hegel points out that understanding always takes itself to be conscious of what is other than it and does not realize that it is self-conscious. It is we phenomenologists, not understanding itself, who recognize that understanding is in fact conscious of itself. In Hegel’s own words, “it is only *for us* that this truth exists, not yet for consciousness.” Nevertheless, in understanding something else to be rational and law-like, understanding is, indeed, “communing directly with itself, enjoying only itself”; this, Hegel notes, is why understanding affords such satisfaction.⁵ Self-consciousness is thus not merely an accident of nature, but is logically entailed by the structure of consciousness itself. Hegel’s next task is to examine what is involved in being *explicitly* self-conscious, or “*what consciousness knows in knowing itself*.”⁶ We become explicitly self-conscious, in Hegel’s view, when we make our selves and our own

identity the explicit (and all-consuming) object of our concern, that is, when we become wholly and overtly absorbed by ourselves. As we shall see, such self-consciousness proves to be more complex and contradictory than it imagines.

The first thing to note is that consciousness comes to be wholly absorbed by itself while remaining conscious of what is *other* than it. Hegel's phenomenological method has shown that self-consciousness arises in our very consciousness of objects. When consciousness wakes up to the fact that it is primarily conscious of and concerned with itself, the objects of perception and understanding do not suddenly disappear from view. On the contrary, they remain before us as the external objects *in relation to which* we are principally conscious of ourselves. For Hegel, self-consciousness is thus not exclusively consciousness of oneself; it is a relation to something other than me in which I relate to myself above all.

This is not to deny that, like Descartes in the *Meditations*, I can "shut my eyes, stop my ears, withdraw all my senses" and "converse with myself" in total separation from things.⁷ What can be reached through Cartesian doubt, however, is no more than *abstract* self-consciousness, because such doubt abstracts from the conditions under which alone concrete, all-embracing self-consciousness is possible: namely, consciousness of an external world in relation to which we find ourselves. As we shall see below, Hegel acknowledges that such abstract self-consciousness is possible and is an important moment of true, concrete self-consciousness. He claims, however, that true self-consciousness itself does not merely abstract from but (to borrow Kant's term) "accompanies" our consciousness of objects.

From Hegel's point of view, Descartes overlooks the moment of other-relatedness that is essential to true consciousness of oneself. Yet there is nevertheless something to be learned from Descartes about true self-consciousness: for in remaining conscious of real, external objects, self-consciousness must also seek to *negate* those objects. Consciousness finds itself in what is other than it; but the very otherness of the objects I encounter inevitably prevents me from relating wholly to myself. In order to achieve unalloyed self-consciousness, therefore, I must regard the object before me as something that is *not* essentially other than or independent of me after all, but there merely *for* me. I continue to consider the object to be real, and (unlike Descartes) do not declare it to be a figment of my imagination; but I deem it to offer no resistance to me and to yield to my ability to negate or consume it for my own satisfaction and self-enjoyment. Insofar as self-consciousness relates to itself through negating objects around it, it is, in Hegel's word, *desire* (*Begierde*). Self-consciousness necessarily takes the form of desire, therefore, because Descartes is half-right: consciousness does enhance its sense of itself by negating the objects around it, but it directs its activity of negation at a realm of objects whose reality is not in doubt and that, consequently, forever *remains* to be negated.

Note that desire arises at this point in the *Phenomenology* not (or, rather, not just) because we are organic, embodied beings, but because of the very nature of self-consciousness itself. Concrete self-consciousness is not immediate self-awareness, but self-awareness mediated by and inseparable from the awareness of what is other. Self-consciousness is interested in itself above all, and yet, as a complex form of *consciousness*, it is necessarily related to external things. If it is to attain an undiluted consciousness of *itself*, it must thus negate and destroy the other things it encoun-

ters. As this activity of negating what is other than itself, self-consciousness is desire. In Hegel's own words, the origin of desire is thus the fact that "self-consciousness is . . . essentially the return from *otherness*." Note that what we desire, in Hegel's view, is not the object as such, but rather, as Jean Hyppolite puts it, "the unity of the I with itself." If Hegel is right, in seeking to enjoy the object, we are in fact seeking to enjoy *ourselves*.⁸

The idea that desire is the practical activity of negating objects forms the cornerstone of the influential interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology* presented by Alexandre Kojève. Kojève lectured on Hegel's *Phenomenology* at the École des Hautes Études in Paris from 1933 to 1939 and counted in his audience many of the leading French intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century, including Merleau-Ponty, Bataille, Klossowski, Breton, and Queneau.⁹ His lectures were published in 1947 and, together with the extensive commentary on the *Phenomenology* by Hyppolite which appeared in 1946, set the standard for reading Hegel in France (and beyond) for the following 50 years.

In my view, however, Kojève seriously distorts Hegel's account of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* by conflating the idea that desire is the activity of negation with the further idea that the subject of desire is essentially "empty." According to Kojève, the desiring subject is "an *emptiness* (*vide*) greedy for content; an emptiness that wants to be filled by what is full"; that is to say, "desire is *absence* of being" that seeks to fill itself "with a *natural*, biological content." To my mind, this distinctively Kojévian conception of desire finds no place in Hegel's account. Desire does, indeed, negate the object. Yet it does so not to fill a void in the subject, but rather to confirm and enhance the subject's sense of self: desire, Hegel writes, is simply the movement of consciousness whereby its "identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it." *Pace* Kojève, the desiring self in the *Phenomenology* does not lack a sense of its own being. If anything, it is rather too full of itself, for it regards everything around it as there for it alone. In so doing, desire considers the other to be nothing but an opportunity for desire itself to negate it. Desire is thus for Hegel "certain of the nothingness of this other," but it is by no means clear that desire takes itself to be sheer "absence" or "emptiness."¹⁰

From Desire to Mutual Recognition

Explicit self-consciousness must take the form of practical activity or desire. Hegel points out, however, that the self-certainty achieved in the satisfaction of desire is in fact not quite as unalloyed as it initially appears to be. This is because desire is satisfied only by negating and consuming something else. In the absence of other things, there is no satisfaction and no certainty of oneself. As Hegel writes, "desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other." Consequently, "in order that this supersession (*Aufheben*) can take place, there must be this other."¹¹ Desire, for Hegel, is intrinsically contradictory: it needs the *other* so that it can enjoy itself *alone*.

Self-consciousness can therefore never revel undisturbed in its satisfaction and self-certainty. Whenever it is satisfied, it must once again seek out new objects that arouse its desire and enjoy itself in consuming them. As Hegel puts it, self-consciousness necessarily “produces the object again, and the desire as well,” and it does so over and over again. This is why desire can never afford us the undiluted self-consciousness it promises: its certainty of itself is always interrupted by its renewed encounter with the other things it needs in order to enjoy itself. In Judith Butler’s words, desire thus “affirms *itself as an impossible project*”; or, as Hegel himself states (in this somewhat ungainly sentence), “it is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire.”¹² Yet Hegel does not conclude from this that genuine self-consciousness as such is impossible. Rather, he goes on to examine what is needed – beyond desire – for such self-consciousness to be achieved.

Desire fails to secure pure self-certainty because it always has to seek out new objects that are *other* than consciousness. In negating such objects, desire does find satisfaction and enjoys itself; but it ceases to be certain of itself as soon as it encounters the otherness and independence of things once again. A more secure self-consciousness would be achieved, however, if consciousness were able to preserve its certainty of itself in its very awareness of the independence of things. How might it do this?

Hegel’s answer is clear: by turning its attention specifically toward things that in their very independence *negate themselves* and thereby allow consciousness to be certain only of itself. Simply eliminating all consciousness of other things is not an option for self-consciousness. Hegel has shown that self-consciousness first arises in our consciousness of other things, and that such consciousness of otherness remains an integral part of the consciousness that is explicitly concerned with itself. That is why self-consciousness must be desire. If consciousness is not to be restricted to being perennially renewed desire, therefore, the only logical alternative is for it to relate to something independent that negates itself for the sake of self-consciousness: “on account of the independence of the object, . . . it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself.”¹³

What kinds of objects perform such an independent negation of themselves? One possible candidate is the *living* object, or organism. In his account of understanding, Hegel argued that the objects of understanding include not just those that are law-governed but also those that are alive. Living beings thus belong among the objects that desire seeks to consume. Furthermore, as Hegel construes it, life is the explicit process of self-negation: death does not just descend on living organisms from the outside, but is immanent in life from the start, because “the simple substance of Life is the splitting up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences.”¹⁴

So, do living things afford us the opportunity of being conscious only of ourselves in being conscious of that which is independent of us? Almost, but not quite. The problem is that living things do not preserve their independence when they negate themselves: when they die, they simply cease to be. As Hegel puts it, “the differentiated, merely *living*, shape does indeed also supersede its independence in the process of Life, but it ceases with its distinctive difference to be what it is.”¹⁵ (The same is true of inorganic objects: insofar as they “negate themselves,” they do so only by ceasing to be what they are.)

The logic of self-consciousness demands, however, that we achieve self-certainty in relating to objects that retain their independence from us. We can satisfy this demand only by relating to an object that negates itself but that is “equally independent in this negativity of itself.” Such an object, Hegel maintains, cannot merely be a living thing (or an inorganic object), but must be another consciousness or self-consciousness. Consequently, “*self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*”¹⁶

At this point Hegel appears no longer to be just a critic of Descartes, but to draw a positive lesson from the latter’s meditations (though Hegel does not mention him by name). We do not learn from Descartes what it is to be concretely self-conscious; only phenomenology can teach us that. Nevertheless, in his *cogito* argument Descartes proves that consciousness retains an abstract awareness of its own independent identity and existence even when it calls into question and abstracts from every particular aspect of itself. The logic of self-consciousness demands that we achieve concrete self-certainty in relating to another thing that negates itself for our sake and that retains its independent identity in so doing. As Hans-Georg Gadamer writes, “only consciousness is able to . . . cancel itself in such a fashion that it does not cease to exist.”¹⁷ This fact, I would suggest, we learn from Descartes (as well, of course, as from Fichte).

It is important not to lose sight of the point at issue here. Descartes himself fails to see that concrete self-consciousness is to be gained in a relation to what is irreducibly *other* than consciousness. Yet he helps us to see that that very other cannot just take the form of an inanimate or animate thing, but must also take the form of another *self-consciousness*, for he shows that self-consciousness alone is able to negate every aspect of itself and preserve itself in so doing. Of course, to be genuinely and concretely self-conscious, that other self-consciousness must in turn be related to what is other than it, and so must itself be desire and relate to another self-consciousness. The specific point that Hegel is making here, however, is that the other, to which any concrete self-consciousness relates, must at least be capable of *abstract* self-consciousness: for only in this way can it thoroughly negate itself and at the same time retain its identity.

The desire to be certain of ourselves in our very relation to others is fulfilled not by consuming things, but by interacting with another self-consciousness – one that is not only capable of abstract self-awareness, but also takes the form of desire and relates to a self-consciousness other than itself. Self-consciousness is thus necessarily social or “spiritual”: it is “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I.’” In this social relation, Hegel remarks, I find my own identity out there in an objective form: “just as much ‘I’ as ‘object’.” This is because I find my identity *recognized* by something other than and independent of me. This moment of recognition is built into the act of independent self-negation performed by the other self-consciousness: for by negating itself the other declares itself to be nothing in and for itself – it “posits its otherness . . . as a nothingness” – and so *makes way for me*. The other thus allows me to relate wholly to *myself* in relating to another, because all I see in the other is his or her recognition of my identity.¹⁸

If we are to enjoy full self-consciousness, the hermit’s existence cannot be an option for us, for we can become properly self-conscious only in the society of others

who recognize us. Of course, we could try to turn our backs on self-consciousness. Hegel would point out, however, that self-consciousness is logically entailed by consciousness itself. Insofar as we are conscious at all, we must therefore seek to become fully self-conscious. The hermit, it seems, lives at odds with the logic inherent in consciousness itself.

Kojève provides a very different explanation for the social character of self-consciousness. As noted above, Kojève understands desire to be “emptiness” or the “absence of being.” Such emptiness is filled, we are told, by “destroying, transforming, and ‘assimilating’ the desired non-I.” Kojève goes on to say that “the I created by the active satisfaction of such a Desire will have the same nature as the things toward which that Desire is directed.” If it desires merely living things, it will thus become “a ‘thingish’ I, a merely living I, an animal I.” In this way, however, desire cannot become explicitly conscious of its own essential emptiness; it cannot be, as it were, filled with non-being. Desire becomes explicitly and self-consciously “empty” and “negative” only when it negates and assimilates *another empty desire*. This is because the I that feeds on the desires of others comes to be nothing but desire and negativity through and through: there is nothing about it that is given, natural, and “thing-like.” Furthermore, not only does desire seek to incorporate the desires of others; it also seeks to be *desired* and *recognized* by those others as free, negative desire. It is thus the “desire for ‘recognition’.” Society is human, therefore, “only as a set of Desires mutually desiring one another as Desires.” Indeed, for Kojève, human history is nothing but the “history of desired Desires.”¹⁹

Kojève’s account of Hegelian desire is imaginative and influential (it impressed Sartre, especially), but it misses the crux of Hegel’s argument. For Kojève, what drives desire to become social (through desiring another’s desire) is the desire to be nothing but pure “*negating*” Desire, and hence *Action* that *transforms* the given being,” or the desire to be free from being determined by what is given.²⁰ In my view, this desire to be (and to be recognized as) *pure* negativity certainly plays a role later in Hegel’s account; indeed, as Kojève himself points out, it is what gives rise to the life and death struggle. It does not, however, feature in the account of desire that we have been considering so far.

Hegel’s own account shows not how desire seeks to become pure desire, freed from determination by independent objects, but how self-certainty is attained by a consciousness that considers independent otherness to be *irreducible*. Unlike Kojèvan desire, Hegelian desire learns that we are always conscious of what is other than and independent of us, and that we can never fulfill the desire to be purely free. For Hegel, if I am to be conscious of myself alone, I can thus do so only in relation to what is and remains independent of me. But how is this possible? Only if the other, in its very independence, negates itself and puts itself at my disposal. This in turn is possible only when another self-consciousness thinks of itself as nothing, recognizes me alone, and thereby enables me to find nothing but myself reflected in it. Gadamer puts the point perfectly: “if self-consciousness is to become true self-consciousness, then it must . . . find another self-consciousness that is willing to be ‘for it’.”²¹

To recapitulate: for Kojève, what drives self-consciousness to become social is its desire to *assimilate* (as well as be desired by) another’s desire; for Hegel, by contrast, what renders self-consciousness social is its acceptance of the other as an *independ-*

ent source of recognition for itself. This significant difference between Kojève and Hegel leads them to very different views of what is implicit in and made necessary by social life.

According to Kojève, the direct consequence of desire's entrance into social relations is struggle and conflict. Each desire, Kojève insists, "wants to negate, to assimilate, to make its own, to subjugate, the other Desire as Desire." Furthermore, each seeks to have its exclusive right to satisfaction recognized by all other desires. "If . . . there is a *multiplicity* of these Desires for universal Recognition," Kojève concludes, "it is obvious that the Action that is born of these Desires can – at least in the beginning – be nothing but a life and death *Fight*."²² This "fight" or struggle in turn leads to the creation of masters and slaves. Human social and historical existence is thus distinguished principally by fighting, slavery and work.

For Kojève (or, rather, for Kojève's Hegel), there is a point at which historical development stops: namely, when a community of mutual recognition is produced that puts an end to struggle and domination. (Kojève's Hegel identifies this "universal" state – somewhat bizarrely – with Napoleon's Empire.²³) Nevertheless, what has prevailed throughout history prior to this point is nothing but struggle and domination, because these are generated by the very desire that gives rise to social interaction in the first place.

By placing struggle at the heart of social interaction (even though he believes it can be overcome), Kojève in my view paves the way (perhaps along with Nietzsche) for Sartre's bleak claim that "the essence of the relations between consciousnesses is . . . conflict." It is on the basis of this claim that Sartre then accuses Hegel of "optimism" for believing that genuinely mutual recognition is possible. Hegel is praised for his "brilliant intuition" that I "depend on the Other *in my being*"; but he is castigated for thinking "that an objective agreement can be realized between consciousnesses – by authority of the Other's recognition of me and of my recognition of the Other."²⁴

Sartre's emphasis in *Being and Nothingness* on the inevitability of social conflict is notoriously uncompromising, but he is not alone in challenging what Jay Bernstein calls Hegel's "worrying 'reconciliations'."²⁵ Many post-Hegelians balk at Hegel's suggestion that mutual recognition is a real possibility in modern society (or perhaps even already achieved), and prefer to follow Kant in regarding recognition and respect as at most moral ideals in an essentially imperfect world. Some have even argued that the very idea of successful mutual recognition is unsustainable. Recently, for example, Alexander García Düttmann has claimed that "recognition is always embedded in a destabilizing tension . . . [and] is *always* an improper, dissimilar, one-sided recognition." Indeed, if one follows Hegel, Düttmann maintains, "recognition can become what is meant by its concept only in a struggle for life and death."²⁶ As we have seen, Kojève would not endorse such a definitive judgment. There is little doubt, however, that he opens the door to such judgments by claiming that the life and death struggle arises directly from the very nature of social interaction between self-consciousnesses.

In contrast to Kojève, Hegel argues that what is made necessary by the interaction between self-consciousnesses is mutual recognition rather than conflict. This does not mean that social and historical existence will in fact always be characterized

by respect and love for one's fellow human beings; Hegel is not that naïve. It means that *logically*, when all that it entails has been rendered fully explicit, genuine social interaction turns out to require mutual recognition. Hegel does not deny that social conflict constantly arises. His claim, however, is that it arises not because we are social beings as such, but because we fail to understand properly what social interaction demands.

Note that, on this interpretation, there is nothing particularly "optimistic" about Hegel's belief that mutual recognition is a real possibility for human beings. That belief is grounded in a subtle comprehension of the form that genuine intersubjectivity logically must take: if social life is to fulfill its purpose and enable us to become conscious of ourselves in relation to what is other than us, there is nothing it can be *but* mutual recognition. For the Hegelian, it is actually Sartre who has lost sight of the truth: for the assertion that social life is in essence riven with conflict – the assertion on the basis of which Sartre accuses Hegel of "optimism" – can only be made by one who himself misunderstands what true intersubjectivity entails.

For Hegel, self-consciousness must be desire; but we achieve a fully objective sense of ourselves only by relating to something irreducibly independent in which we find our own identity reflected. Such a thing can only be another self-consciousness that *recognizes* us. Logically, therefore, concrete self-consciousness must be social and intersubjective. But why should the fact that I require recognition from another mean that our relation must be one of *mutual* recognition? Hegel's answer is to be found in §§178–84 of the *Phenomenology*.²⁷

Genuine self-consciousness, Hegel writes, is faced by another self-consciousness by which it finds itself recognized. It has thus "come *out of itself*": it is not just enclosed within its own interiority, but sees its identity located, as it were, "over there." In such a relation, self-consciousness certainly gains a sense of self through being recognized. Yet at the same time, Hegel maintains, it feels that it has "lost itself," precisely because it finds its own identity over there in the eyes of the other. Equally, however, self-consciousness lacks any real sense that the other is genuinely *other* than it, since it sees in the other nothing but its own self. Insofar as self-consciousness does no more than find itself recognized by another, therefore, its consciousness of both itself and the other actually remains deficient.

To remedy this situation, Hegel argues, self-consciousness must "proceed to supersede (*aufheben*) the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being." Self-consciousness does so by withdrawing itself from the other, locating its true identity within *itself* (as it were, "over here"), and thereby overcoming its previous sense of being what it is only in and through the *other*. In making this move, however, self-consciousness loses what has been shown to be a crucial ingredient of any concrete sense of self, and thus, as Hegel puts it, "proceeds to supersede its *own* self": for by insisting that its own identity resides wholly within itself, it abandons the idea that its identity is to be found reflected in another and so is something objective.

Yet all is not lost: for, as Hegel immediately points out, this withdrawal of self-consciousness out of the other into itself is in fact ambiguous. In withdrawing into itself, consciousness does indeed recover the certainty that it is what it is in itself. In Hegel's own words, "it receives back its own self . . . [and] again becomes equal to

itself.” At the same time, however, self-consciousness restores the other self-consciousness to its own proper otherness. It no longer sees the other merely as a mirror reflecting it, but “equally gives the other self-consciousness back again to itself . . . and thus lets the other again go free (*entläßt also das Andere wieder frei*).”²⁸ That is to say, self-consciousness *recognizes* the other as another free and independent self-consciousness. The action of self-consciousness is ambiguous for this reason: by withdrawing out of the other wholly into *itself*, self-consciousness lets the other go free, and thereby unwittingly affords itself for the first time the opportunity to be recognized by, and to find itself in, another that it knows to be genuinely *other* than it.

To begin with, self-consciousness did not “see the other as an essential being,” because in the other it saw only itself. Yet it did not enjoy an unalloyed sense of self either, since it found itself “over there” in another (that it did not properly recognize). Now, by contrast, self-consciousness has a clear sense of its own identity and recognizes that the other is something wholly other than and independent of itself. Consequently, it can at last fulfill the condition required for concrete self-consciousness: for it can find *itself* recognized by and reflected in another that is known to be truly *other*.

Achieving self-consciousness, as we have seen, requires that I relate to myself in relating to that which is other than me. This means that I must relate to another self-consciousness that recognizes me alone. Self-consciousness must, therefore, be social and intersubjective. We now know that by itself recognition accorded to me by the other is not sufficient to enable me to be concretely self-conscious. To attain that end I must be recognized by another that I recognize in turn as a free and independent other. Genuine self-consciousness thus requires not just recognition of my identity by the other, but *mutual* recognition by each of us of the other. Self-consciousness must be a “double movement of the two self-consciousnesses” working freely together. In such a movement, Hegel writes, “each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both.”

Mutual recognition, for Hegel, requires the uncoerced cooperation of the two (or more) self-consciousnesses involved. Indeed, not only must the two self-consciousnesses freely recognize one another; in fact, they must both *recognize* that their mutual recognition and cooperation is needed for either to be concretely and objectively self-conscious. In Hegel’s own words, they must “*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another.”

As Williams points out, genuine self-consciousness involves much more than mere desire (though it must also incorporate desire). Whereas desire “seiz[es] upon and negat[es] the object,” genuine self-consciousness requires recognition from the other, which in turn entails “allowing the other to be what it is” and “letting the other go free.” Self-consciousness would like to know only *itself* in the other and be the sole object of the other’s recognition. Such self-certainty can be achieved, however, only “through membership or partnership with Other.”²⁹ For one person to have a concrete and objective understanding of himself, he must join together with somebody else.

Note that, in the paragraphs we have been considering, Hegel is not merely setting out a moral ideal for humanity. He is unfolding with uncompromising rigor the necessary conditions for concrete self-consciousness. He shows that, as beings who are by necessity conscious of what is other than ourselves, we can achieve certainty of ourselves only when we are recognized by another whom we recognize as free in turn. This conception of mutual recognition, I contend, lies at the heart of Hegel's whole social and political philosophy.

The Dialectic of Master and Slave

According to Hegel, conflict is not produced by the logic that renders social interaction necessary in the first place. It is generated, however, by a primitive self-consciousness that fails to appreciate the importance of mutual recognition. Indeed, it is generated when self-consciousness is animated by a desire similar to that described by Kojève: the desire to be recognized as the activity of pure *negating*. Such desire is not sheer, self-absorbed desire as such, since it seeks recognition from another. Nevertheless, it wants to be recognized as “self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else” and thus as “the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness.”³⁰ As Hegel demonstrates, this desire is profoundly contradictory.

Such self-consciousness wants to show that it is not bound to or limited by anything it is given to be by nature, that its identity is not tied to its sex, age, skin color, or anything to do with its body. Indeed, it wants to show that it is not even attached to life. It also wants to prove that it is not restricted by anything or anybody outside it. Such self-consciousness thus regards itself as absolutely free from determination or limitation by anything given to or other than itself. It tries to demonstrate this freedom in two ways: by seeking the death of the other and by ostentatiously risking its own life in the process. In this way, it shows that it values nothing except its own freedom or pure “being-for-self.” Indeed, it shows that, in its own eyes, its own identity consists in nothing but the pure activity of *negating* anything given to or other than itself. Nowhere in his account does Hegel suggest that primitive self-consciousness thinks of itself as an “emptiness” that seeks to be “filled.” Kojève is, however, right to say that it takes itself to be pure “negating-negativity.” It is this desire to prove itself to be pure freedom and negativity by killing the other – a desire that animates each self-consciousness – that leads to the life and death struggle. This struggle is thus generated not by any scarcity of resources – or, as Paul Redding suggests, by the desire to “preserve life” – but, rather, by a primitive *idea* of freedom.³¹

Primitive self-consciousness not only wants to be free, it also wants to be recognized by the other as free. It wants the other to see that it is trying to kill the other and risking its own life in so doing. This desire for recognition is what plunges such self-consciousness into self-contradiction. Robert Solomon puts the point well: “insofar as one's identity arises and is defined only with other people, killing the others is self-defeating, for one loses precisely that source of recognition that one has come to require.”³² If either self-consciousness is to attain recognition, therefore, one of them must back down. This is not to say that in every such struggle one party