THE I IN WE

Studies in the Theory of Recognition

Axel Honneth

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Translated by Joseph Ganahl

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Preface

This volume brings together a number of contributions to discussions over recent years on how to build upon the basic assumptions of a Hegelian theory of recognition. After initially outlining my interpretation of Hegel's approach in *The Struggle for Recognition*, I had my hands full correcting or further elucidating my position in response to various objections. In particular, a debate with Nancy Fraser and the Tanner Lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, offered welcome opportunities to give a more precise account of what were still vague considerations.[1] But in going down this path and attempting to deal with various impulses from alternative theories of intersubjectivity,[2] many questions still remained unsolved. After all, the reason I had sought to reconstruct Hegel's theory of recognition was to garner insights that would not only allow a rethinking of the concept of justice, but also lead to a better account of the relationship between socialization and individuation, between social reproduction and individual identity formation. My diverse efforts to clarify this relationship over recent years are gathered in this volume. Apart from a few exceptions, the essays move along the margins of social philosophy, where normative questions can only be answered by taking into account the empirical undertakings of other, neighbouring disciplines.

Part I, however, contains two essays in which I return to essential elements of Hegel's practical philosophy. Whereas in *The Struggle for Recognition* I had still assumed that only Hegel's Jena lectures contained coherent elements of a theory of recognition, after more intensive study of his mature writings I came to realize how wrong I had been. I

no longer believe that Hegel sacrificed his initial intersubjectivism in the course of developing a monological concept of spirit; rather, Hegel sought throughout his life to interpret objective spirit, i.e. social reality, as a set of layered relations of recognition. On the basis of this reassessment I sought to make Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* fruitful for the development of a theory of recognition. Expressed much more strongly than in his early writings is the groundbreaking notion that social justice is to be defined in terms of the requirements of mutual recognition, and that we must take our point of departure in historically developed and already institutionalized relations of recognition.[3] In the essay on Hegel's concept of self-consciousness (Chapter 1), which deals with a key chapter from *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I attempt to clarify the systematic meaning of recognition in this context; for the mature Hegel, recognition refers to an act of moral self-restriction, which we must be able to perform on ourselves in the face of others if we are to arrive at a consciousness of our self. By contrast, the essay on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (Chapter 2) attempts to answer the difficult question of how we are to conceive of the internal connection between recognition and human freedom. According to my interpretation, Hegel creates this link by attempting to demonstrate to contemporary proponents of liberalism that it is only by taking part in institutionalized practices of individual self-restriction that we can experience our own will as being completely free.

In the essays that make up Part II, I attempt to further develop these Hegelian ideas in order to solve some central problems of contemporary theories of justice. The systematic framework for these approaches can be found in the first essay (Chapter 3), which is meant to correct our customary conception of social justice by redirecting it from a fixation on the principles of distributing goods

towards measures for creating symmetrical relations of recognition. However, and as I attempt to show in the subsequent chapters, such a theoretical reversal must not shy away from problematizing the current organization of labour (Chapter 4), or from the difficult question of which forms of social recognition currently contribute indirectly to reinforcing social domination (Chapter 5). Theoretical predeterminations can exclude neither the sphere of societal labour nor ideologies that serve to stabilize domination from the corpus of a theory of justice. In a discussion of the highly instructive study *On Justification* by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Chapter 6), I combine some of the already developed ideas by arguing against the authors' tendency to de-structure social morality, instead emphasizing the normative weight of already institutionalized spheres of recognition. I undertake a similar endeavour in the chapter on David Miller's theory of justice (Chapter 7), which was originally published as a preface to the German edition of his now classic monograph, *The Principles of Social Justice*. Here as well, I argue that if a theory of justice is to establish stronger ties to social reality, a Hegelian ‘reconstruction’ of already established principles of recognition is crucial.

In Part III, which bears the relatively vague title ‘Social and Theoretical Applications’, I take the ideas described in the first two parts of the book and attempt to make them useful for explanatory purposes. Therefore, problems of sociological explanation, rather than normative questions, stand at the centre of these individual essays. It will soon become apparent, however, that when it comes to ‘applying’ these ideas, there is no way of cleanly separating social facts from normative claims to validity. As soon as we follow Hegel and interpret relations of recognition as being constitutive for all of social reality, we must recognize that any explanation of social processes necessarily invokes

prevailing norms and principles. Claims and demands, obligations and beliefs are just as much a part of reality as supposedly purely 'objective' matters. The first chapter in this part (Chapter 8) represents what is still a very tentative response to recent attempts within political science to employ the concept of recognition to explain tensions and dynamics within the field of international relations. My sole aim in this chapter is to clarify the extent to which it makes sense to conceive of relations between states as being regulated by expectations of recognition. The other two chapters in this part are dedicated to theoretical explorations undertaken at the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt (Chapters 9 and 10). Together with Martin Hartmann, I attempt to give a more detailed explanation of our interdisciplinary research on 'paradoxes' in the development of contemporary capitalism. I do so by empirically illustrating the extent to which structural economic changes have transformed historically developed recognitional expectations into disciplinary demands on subjects. In the context of this book, however, both of these more sociological essays can only give some initial indications of what a recognition-theoretical diagnosis of the present would have to look like.

Part IV picks up a theoretical issue that I have left almost entirely untouched since the publication of *The Struggle for Recognition*.[4] I have always been convinced that social relations of recognition can only develop under the precondition of corresponding structural developments within the human psyche, such as have been investigated in exemplary fashion by object relations theory. Although my recourse to psychoanalysis has occasionally provoked the accusation that I make the theory of recognition altogether 'too psychological', even today I see no reason to abandon my plan to draw a connection between external social recognition and structural psychological formation. Of

course, one could draw a false genetic conclusion and justify claims to recognition with reference to the danger of psychological injury, but apart from that, dovetailing the theory of recognition with psychoanalysis seems to me to be an entirely advantageous endeavour. I have sought to further develop some of these insights in two essays in which I address the significance of social groups (Chapter 12) and the role of psychological 'dedifferentiations' (*Entgrenzungen*) (Chapter 14). The other two chapters in the final part of the volume (Chapters 11 and 13), especially the discussion of the work of my friend Joel Whitebook, represent attempts to defend my own, recognition-theoretical interpretation of psychoanalysis against the obvious objection that I have neglected destructive, antisocial drives.

I wish to thank Stephan Altemeier and Frauke Köhler for technical assistance in completing the book. Their calm and care ensured that the scattered essays could be put into a unified and systematic form. Eva Gilmer at Suhrkamp once again provided excellent advice in compiling the various chapters. Finally, I wish to thank the translator, Joseph Ganahl, for his loyal service over the years and for ensuring that this volume could appear in English that is both readable and true to the content.

Notes

1 Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political–Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

2 Axel Honneth, *Unsichtbarkeit: Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003).

3 Axel Honneth, *Suffering from Indeterminacy: An Attempt at a Reactualization of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. Jack Ben-Levi (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum Ltd, 2000).

4 The following essays represent the few exceptions: Axel Honneth, ‘Objektbeziehungstheorie und postmoderne Identität: Über das vermeintliche Veralten der Psychoanalyse’, in *Unsichtbarkeit*, pp. 138–61; Honneth, ‘Appropriating Freedom: Freud's Conception of Individual Self-Relation’, in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. James Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 126–45.

Part I
Hegelian Roots

1
From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Grounding of Self-Consciousness

Hardly any of Hegel's works have attracted as much attention as the chapter on ‘Self-Consciousness’ in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As difficult and inaccessible as the book may be on the whole, this chapter, in which consciousness exits ‘the nightlike void of the super-sensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present’[1] (111), finally offers something that we can understand. All of a sudden, his account of the mind's experience of itself takes on more striking colours, the lonely self-consciousness unsuspectingly encounters other subjects, and what was previously a merely cognitive matter is transformed into a social drama consisting of a ‘struggle for life and death’. In short, this chapter brings together all the elements capable of supplying post-idealistic philosophy's hunger for reality with material for concretion and elaboration. Hegel's first students seized the opportunity offered by this chapter and took his speculative philosophy out of the ethereal sphere of ideas and notions, pulling it back down to the earth of social reality. And ever since, authors from Lukács and Brecht to Kojève have sought unceasingly to uncover in the succession of desire, recognition and struggle the outlines of a historically situatable, political course of events.

However, by sharpening Hegel's considerations into concrete and tangible concepts, we risk losing sight of this chapter's argumentative core in the face of all this conflictual interaction. After all, Hegel intended to do much more than merely prove that subjects must necessarily

enter into a struggle once they have realized their mutual dependence. By employing his phenomenological method, he sought to demonstrate that a subject can only arrive at a ‘consciousness’ of its own ‘self’ if it enters into a relationship of ‘recognition’ with another subject. Hegel's aims were much more fundamental than historicizing or sociological interpretations cared to realize; he was primarily interested in elucidating not an historical event or instance of conflict, but a transcendental fact that should prove to be a prerequisite of all human sociality. If any description of an historical event is to be found at all in the chapter on ‘Self-Consciousness’, then it is only after the event that Hegel is truly interested in has already occurred: that is, after the subject has emerged from the self-referentiality of mere desire and become aware of its dependence on its fellow human subjects. Hegel thus seeks to do nothing less than explain the transition from natural to conscious (*geistig*) being, from the human animal to the rational subject. The social conflicts that follow in this chapter are merely intended as a processual articulation of the implications this consciousness (*Geistigkeit*) has for human beings.

In what follows I will attempt to reconstruct the decisive step in Hegel's line of argumentation: the transition from ‘Desire’ to ‘Recognition’. The difficulty of this endeavour is clearly demonstrated by the long list of interpretations that, by failing to pay any real attention to Hegel's own formulations, have arrived at quite wilful and even absurd understandings of his text.[2] One reason for this tendency might lie in the quantitative imbalance between the length of the chapter on ‘Self-Consciousness’ and its central line of argumentation. Of the nearly forty pages comprising the chapter, Hegel dedicates only one and a half pages to his claim that self-consciousness requires the recognition of another self. I want to place these few pages at the centre

of my reconstruction by first of all clarifying Hegel's concept of desire (I), in order to then elucidate his internal transition to the concept of recognition (II). My interpretation, which focuses strongly on Hegel's precise wording, will demonstrate that Hegel provides us with more than one argument as to why intersubjective recognition constitutes a necessary prerequisite for attaining self-consciousness.

I

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel describes the process by which we arrive at an understanding of the presuppositions of all our knowledge from the perspective of both an observing philosopher and the subjects involved. He seeks to portray every step in the consummation of this understanding so as to make them intelligible not only to the reflective observer, but also to the agents involved. The chapter begins with the observation that both parties have already learned, through the previously described steps, that the object of their cognition is dependent on their own actions. The world of objects no longer faces them as a merely external ‘given’ about which they must attain certainty; rather, this world proves to be a ‘mode’ of their own relation to it: ‘But now there has arisen what did not emerge in these previous relationships [of sense certainty, perception and understanding], viz. a certainty which is identical with its truth; for the certainty is to itself its own object, and consciousness is to itself the truth’ (104). Hegel means that the subject is now capable of perceiving itself as an authoritative source of its own knowledge about the world. Whatever ‘truth’ about reality it is capable of calling to mind is due not to its passive perception of reality, but to an active act of consciousness that has already constituted the alleged ‘object’. In a certain sense, both the observer

and the observed have advanced to an epistemological standpoint already characterized by Kant's transcendental philosophy. As a result, both parties are faced with the question as to the nature of the knowledge that subjects can have of themselves as originators of true claims. The ‘self’, whose consciousness of itself forms the object of Hegel's subsequent considerations, is therefore the rational individual, who is already abstractly aware of its constitutive, world-creating cognitive acts.

Hegel then attempts to solve this problem by first having the phenomenological observer anticipate the steps of experience that the involved subject will then have to take. From the perspective of the observer, it is easy to see the kind of difficulty or insufficiency that marks the beginning of each new stage, such that the observed subject sees itself compelled to proceed to the subsequent process of experience. What this subject would need to perceive itself as in order to truly possess self-consciousness is its own active role as an originator of reality. But as long as it is only aware of itself as the ‘consciousness’ that, according to Kant, must be able to accompany all ‘ideas’, the subject does not experience itself as constituting objects of experience. My awareness of the fact that reality is ultimately the content of my mental states is not enough to assure myself of my synthesizing and determining activity; rather, I perceive my consciousness just as selectively (*punktuell*) and passively as I perceive the mental attention I pay to it in that moment.[3] For this reason, Hegel explicitly criticizes Kant and Fichte in speaking of a mere duplication of consciousness: ‘But since what it [self-consciousness] distinguishes from itself is *only itself as* itself, the difference, as an otherness, is *immediately superseded* for it; the difference *is not*, and *it* [self-consciousness] is only the motionless tautology of: ‘I am I’; but since for it the

difference does not have the form of *being*, it is *not* self-consciousness' (105).

There must be a difference between the type of consciousness I have of my mental activities and these activities themselves, one that is not yet present in the initial stage of self-consciousness. After all, I lack the experience that would make me aware of the fact that, unlike my accompanying and floating attention, the activities of my consciousness are active and modify reality. The philosophical observer, who is aware of this insufficiency at the first stage of self-consciousness, thus sketches in advance the type of experience needed in order to become conscious of this difference. At this very early point, Hegel surprisingly uses the notion of 'Desire' to describe this second stage. He thus chooses a term that refers not to a mental but to a corporeal activity. However, before the involved subject can take up such a stance, one that Robert Brandom terms 'erotic',[4] it must first learn to grasp reality as something it can relate to in its efforts to satisfy elementary needs. Hegel uses the notion of 'Life' to elucidate this intermediate step, which is meant to explain why observing subjects are motivated to take up a stance of 'Desire'. This notion consequently occupies a key position in his argumentation, for otherwise we would not be capable of understanding the transition that compels individuals to continue the process of exploring their self-consciousness.

Hegel already speaks of 'Life' in the previous chapter, in which he introduces 'Understanding' (*Verstand*) as a form of knowledge of objects that is superior to 'perception' (A.III). To understand reality in its totality with the help of Understanding as 'Life' not only means ascribing to the disassociated elements of perception a unified principle in the form of 'Force' (*Kraft*), but, more importantly, it also means learning how to grasp the synthesizing capacity of

one's own consciousness in relation to this sort of knowledge. The category of ‘Life’ therefore represents the turning point that provides the prerequisites for the chapter on self-consciousness, because the subject here starts to interpret the world as being dependent on its own cognition, thereby beginning to develop ‘self-consciousness’. But surprisingly, the same category of ‘Life’ reappears in this new context precisely at the point of transition from the initial, empty or merely duplicated form of self-consciousness to a second, superior form. After the observer has finished the act of anticipation (*Vorausschau*), which means that it is only through the stance of ‘Desire’ that the subject can arrive at a better consciousness of its ‘Self’, Hegel provides an account of all the implications of the notion of Life, one that is clearly described as an act of reflection on the part of the involved subject: ‘What self-consciousness distinguishes from itself as having *being*, also has in it, in so far as it is posited as being, not merely the character of sense-certainty and perception, but it is being that is reflected into itself, and the object of immediate desire is a *living thing*’ (106). We can conclude that at this point, Hegel has begun to demonstrate how the observing subject begins to draw consequences from the previously developed notion of ‘Life’ for its own understanding of self. While previously it could only conceive of this ‘Self’ in accordance with the passive observation of its mental activities, thereby envisioning this ‘Self’ as a worldless, non-corporeal and non-situated ‘I’, it now begins to perceive itself in opposition to the concept of the ‘living thing’, a concept of which it is already in cognitive possession. What the observer already knows – i.e. that the subject must take up a stance of desire in order to arrive at a better and more complete self-consciousness – is something that this subject only gradually calls to mind by applying the notion of Life reflexively to its own stance towards the world. It learns that its self is not a placeless,

selective consciousness, but always related to organic reality in active praxis; it can no longer behave actively, i.e. as a naturally self-reproducing being, towards a world that is full of liveliness. In this sense, we could follow Fred Neuhouser and claim that the subject has had a transcendental experience, because it recalls that it was only capable of conceiving of the notion of 'Life' because it had encountered this object in the practical stance of active access.[5]

Of course, before Hegel can ascribe this kind of experience to the subject, he must develop categorically the concept of 'Life' up to the point at which its consequences for the individual's relation-to-world arise automatically. After all, the change that occurs in the subject's reflection on the notion of Life is intended not as a mere change in the external determination of the observer, but as a conclusion that the observed subject itself draws. In reflecting on what it encounters in the unity of reality it has created with the help of the category of 'Life', the individual cannot avoid having two simultaneous realizations. It observes that the world it has constructed is a totality, preserved through permanent transformation, i.e. a totality of genii whose generic qualities are constantly reproduced through the life cycle of its individual members. 'It is the whole round of this activity that constitutes Life … the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself' (108). Yet because only the individual consciousness can perceive this particularity of the living being, of its genus character, the subject must realize at the same time that it is partially excluded from this life process. As a bearer of consciousness, it seems to belong to a different category from the quality it is conscious of as a living genus: '… in this *result*, Life points to something other than itself, viz. to consciousness, for which Life exists as this unity, or as genus' (109). At this

point, at which we see the preliminary result of the involved subject's self-application of the notion of Life, Hegel's text is especially difficult to understand. The well-known difficulty of not being able to determine precisely whether the determinations he chooses are merely characterizations of the observer or results of the observed subject's experiences becomes even more acute. Hegel formulates the issue as follows:

> This other Life, however, for which the *genus* as such exists, and which is genus on its own account, viz. self-consciousness, exists in the first instance for self-consciousness only as this simple essence, and has itself as pure 'I' for object. In the course of its experience which we are now to consider, this abstract object will enrich itself for the 'I' and undergo the unfolding which we have seen in the sphere of Life. (109)

I take the first part of the first sentence of this compact statement to be an anticipation of the desired result of the observed subject's experience, while the second part of the sentence, which begins with 'in the first instance', points out the momentary state of its self-consciousness. Involved individuals still conceive of their own 'self' as pure, non-situated consciousness, but from the perspective of the observer, the subject must understand itself as an individual member of a living genus. Hegel means that the subject is compelled to make such a transition from pure self-consciousness to 'living' (*lebendig*) self-consciousness in that it must recognize its own liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*) in the liveliness of the reality it constitutes. In a certain sense, it cannot help but discover retrospectively in its own self, through reflection on its own notion of the organic life process, the natural features it shares with the reality that is dependent on it. Yet, Hegel skips this step – at which the subject's own naturalness is discovered in the liveliness of

the self-created object – and immediately moves to the stance in which the observed subject reaffirms its newly gained understanding. In the stance of ‘Desire’, the individual assures itself of itself as a living consciousness, which, although it shares the features of life with all of reality, is still superior to reality in that the latter remains dependent on it as consciousness. Therefore, Desire is a corporeal form of expression in which the subject assures itself that it, as consciousness, possesses living, natural features: ‘… and self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire’ (109).

Hegel's notion of ‘Desire’, which outlines the second stage of self-consciousness, is also clearly intended as a far-reaching critique of the philosophy of consciousness prevalent in his time. He points out that when Kant and Fichte conceive of self-consciousness as the activity by which consciousness merely observes itself, they lose sight of more than just the active, synthesizing side of consciousness. Or in other words, this conception not only robs the subject of the chance to recall its own activity of guaranteeing truth (*wahrheitsverbürgende Aktivität*), but it also suggests that the rational self, of which the subject is seen as possessing knowledge, is free of all natural determinations and thus lacks any kind of organic liveliness. Hegel appears to claim that the philosophy of consciousness denies the subject any kind of direct, unmediated experience of its own corporeality. Not least for the purpose of countering the anti-naturalism of his contemporaries, Hegel builds a second stage of ‘Desire’ into the process of acquiring self-consciousness. In this stance the subject assures itself of its own biological nature in such a way that it expresses its superiority over all other beings. By virtue of its capacity to differentiate between

what is good or bad for it, the subject is always certain of the element of its consciousness that makes it unique. For Hegel, the confirmation of desires, i.e. the satisfaction of elementary, organic needs, plays a double role with regard to self-consciousness. The subject experiences itself both as a part of nature, because it is involved in the determining and heteronomous ‘movement of Life’, and as the active organizing centre of this life, because it can make essential differentiations in Life by virtue of its consciousness. We might even say that Hegel's conception of desire is intended as a demonstration of just how much humans are always antecedently aware of their ‘excentric position’ (Plessner). As long as humans view themselves as need-fulfilling beings and are active in the framework of their desires, they have unmediated knowledge of their double nature, which allows them to stand both inside and outside nature at the same time.

It is important that we attain some clarity about the role played by ‘Desire’, because the literature on Hegel often tends to dismiss this stage merely as something negative, as something to be overcome. But to me, Hegel appears to insist that the experience associated with the satisfaction of our most basic drives gives rise to a kind of self-consciousness that goes far beyond the first form of self-consciousness in terms of content and complexity. Instead of having the subject merely experience itself as selective (*punktuell*) consciousness, which always remains present in all its mental activities, the satisfaction of its desires provides it with the unmediated certainty of a self that has been placed excentrically, along with its mental activity, within nature. Because this self-consciousness does justice to humans' biological nature, Hegel is also convinced that we cannot give up the fundamental achievement of this stage of self-consciousness. Whatever other prerequisites are necessary in order to allow the subject to attain a

proper awareness of its self, these prerequisites must be contained in our awareness of being involved as a ‘living member’ in nature. However, the more we emphasize the achievement of ‘Desire’, the more urgent becomes our search for why Hegel regards this stage of ‘self-consciousness’ as insufficient. He needs but a single brief passage in order to demonstrate the necessity of a further transition. This passage constitutes the next step of our reconstruction.

II

Hardly has Hegel described the essential importance of desires for self-consciousness than he outlines the reasons for the failure of the associated kind of experience. Unlike in his elucidation of the transition from the first stage of self-consciousness to Desire, Hegel does not make a clear distinction between the perspective of the observer and that of the participant. He does not take up the philosophical standpoint and sketch in advance the aim of the next step of experience in order to then have the subject itself go through this learning process; rather, both processes appear to be joined somehow. The starting point for this accelerated, almost rushed description is a summary of the achievement of Desire. In this stance the subject is certain of the ‘nothingness’ or ‘nullity’ of living reality; it views itself in its excentric position as superior to the rest of nature. As a human animal, the appropriate way to express this superiority is to consume the objects of nature in the satisfaction of its desires. Hegel thus remarks that in its desires, the subject ‘gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*’ (109). The transition follows immediately in the next sentence, in which Hegel remarks laconically: ‘In this

satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence' (Ibid.). A few lines further on, Hegel asserts even more explicitly that self-consciousness is unable to 'supersede' its object 'by its negative relation' to this object; rather, 'it produces the object again, and the desire as well' (Ibid.). Hegel is therefore convinced of having uncovered an element of self-deception in the stance of Desire. The subject deceives itself about itself. By believing itself capable of destroying its object through the satisfaction of its needs, through the fulfilment of its desires, it entertains false ideas about its relation to the world. It is much more difficult, however, to determine why this sort of self-deception should motivate a transition to a new stage of self-consciousness. It is unclear why disappointment over the independence of the object should lead to an encounter with the other and to recognition. Nearly all the interpretations of this passage I have seen resort either to metaphorical bridges over this divide or to additional constructions not found in the text itself.[6]

First of all, we need to clarify more precisely what Hegel takes to be the deficit of desire in relation to self-consciousness. His reference to self-deception can only be seen as a first indication of the direction we must go in, not as the solution itself. As readers who follow the directions of the philosophical observer, we already know what kind of self the observed subject is to attain consciousness of after having gone through the previously analysed stages: this subject must truly realize that it itself is the rational, reality-constructing actor of which it is only abstractly and generally aware at the beginning of the chapter. We could also say that the 'I' must arrive at a point at which it understands itself in the constructive activity through which it produces an objective world. In the wake of this process of experience, however, a new demand is made on

self-consciousness, one that the subject could not at all have been aware of at the first stage. By placing itself, as a ‘transcendental’ consequence of its own notion of living reality, within nature as a consuming being, the subject must realize that its reality-creating activity is not merely a particularity of its own self, but a fundamental property of human beings in general. By recognizing the genus-character of Life, i.e. the fact that natural reality exists independent of the continued existence of its individual specimens, the subject is compelled to grasp its own self as an instantiation of an entire genus – the human genus. At the first stage of self-consciousness, self-accompanying observant consciousness, the subject was still very far away from this form of self-consciousness. But at the second stage, rationally compelled by the implications of its own notion of ‘Life’, it attained the threshold at which it views itself and its consciousness as being placed within nature as a superior being. Here it conceives of itself as a natural, organic self that has acquired the certainty of its ability to destroy the rest of nature by consuming its objects in the process of satisfying desires. Hegel now abruptly claims that this ontological assumption is bound to be false, because natural reality continues to exist despite humans' consumptive acts. However restlessly the subject satisfies its desires, the ‘process of life’ as a whole continues despite the destruction of its individual elements. As a result, nature's objects retain their ‘independence’. Therefore, the insufficiency of the experience of ‘Desire’ is, strictly speaking, twofold: first of all, this experience provides the subject with a ‘delusion of omnipotence’, leading it to believe that all of reality is but a product of its own individual conscious activity; second, this prevents the subject from conceiving of itself as a member of a genus. So despite all the advantages this stage has for self-consciousness, it must fail owing to the fact that it creates a false conception of an omnipotent self. Within the

framework of desire, the subject can grasp neither its reality-producing activity nor its own genus-character, because reality in its living totality remains untouched by the activity through which the subject merely satisfies its individual needs.

I have chosen the expressions ‘delusion of omnipotence’ (*Allmachtsphantasie*) and ‘omnipotence’ (*Omnipotenz*) with caution in order to enable comparison with ontogenesis, a comparison that could be helpful at this point. The ingenious psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott has described children's world of experience as a state in which they follow a nearly ontological need to prove to themselves that their environment is dependent on their own intentions. By destroying the objects they possess, children intend to prove that reality obeys their all-encompassing power.[7] What is important for our purposes is not the empirical accuracy of these observations, but their potential usefulness in elucidating Hegel's claims. Hegel seems to want to say the same thing as Winnicott – not in relation to ontogenesis, but certainly with regard to the observed subject's experiences. Both seem to claim that this subject strives, through the need-driven consumption of its environment, to assure itself that the entirety of reality it encounters is a product of its own mental activity. In the course of this striving, however, it is faced with the fact that, as Hegel puts it, the world retains its ‘independence’ (*Selbstständigkeit*), since the existence of reality is not dependent on the survival of its individual elements. According to Winnicott, children exit this omnipotent stage by learning to discover, in the form of the mother or some other attachment figure, a being that reacts to their destructive acts in different ways. Depending on the situation and her own feelings, a mother will sometimes react to a child's attacks by showing understanding, and sometimes disapproval, such that the child eventually

learns to accept another source of intentionality besides his or her own, one to which the child must subordinate his or her conception of the world. Winnicott's line of argumentation can serve as a key for understanding the considerations with which Hegel attempts to motivate a transition from the second to the third stage of self-consciousness.

The sentence immediately following Hegel's description of the failure of ‘Desire’ is quite possibly the most difficult sentence in the chapter on self-consciousness. Without any warning from the knowing observer, Hegel claims that in order for the subject to consummate its self-consciousness, it requires another subject that carries out the same negation ‘within itself’ (*an ihm*) that the former had only performed upon natural reality: ‘On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself (*an ihm*); and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is *in itself* the negative, and must be for the other what it *is*’ (109). Perhaps we should ask what need Hegel is referring to – which he claims can only be satisfied by mutual negation. He cannot have in mind the organic drive previously expressed in the notion of ‘Desire’, because this need has already attained fulfilment in the consumption of the natural world. Despite all the disappointment the subject brought upon itself in this stage, it did succeed in appropriating from reality, according to its own discriminations, the materials that could satisfy its animal or ‘erotic’ needs. So the need that Hegel has in mind must lie deeper and be likewise contained in ‘Desire’, a need we could call ‘ontological’ because it seeks confirmation of a certain specific conception of the ontological character of reality. In the destructive activity of the subject for the purpose of satisfying its desires, the subject seeks to assure itself of