

Robert Pippin

Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit.

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Along with thinkers Terry Pinkard, Robert Brandom, and John MacDowell, Robert Pippin has pioneered a non-metaphysical, Kantian version of Hegel that has been quite influential in the United States. (Cf. Frederick Beiser, 'Dark Days: Anglophone Scholarship Since the 1960s', in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer [Routledge 2007].) Pippin has helped to usher in a Hegel renaissance in the United States and Great Britain, a renaissance that shows few signs of abating. His recent book, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge 2009), can also be seen as part of this project. All this background is important for understanding what is at stake in *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, the work under review here.

In this slim volume, Pippin presents an interpretation of Hegel's conception of self-consciousness as active agency, and he articulates his differences with John McDowell, who sees the sociality of reason primarily as the receptivity of an agent's acquiescence to the norms that govern society. Pippin also takes issue with McDowell's allegorical reading of Chapter 4 of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. This is well-trodden ground in Hegel studies to be sure, but Pippin presents a compact and compelling reading of these sections of the *Phenomenology*, §§166-96. Pippin does not draw upon the older, primarily French, studies of this concept except in the form of asides. Although he provides a passing reference to Kojève and his famous, albeit idiosyncratic, Marxist-inflected reading of Hegel on lordship and bondage, Pippin sets his sights on more recent interpretations of Hegel on self-consciousness, primarily on recent work by Brandom and McDowell.

Pippin aims to make sense of two of Hegel's related claims regarding self-consciousness: 1) 'Self-consciousness is desire itself', and 2) 'Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness' (2-3). The problem, then, is to specify what precisely Hegel means by desire and recognition and the relationship between these two key Hegelian notions.

The key to understanding the place of desire in Hegel's *Phenomenology* amounts to a proposition: the difference between the bare life characteristic of animals—beings that Hegel, along with Aristotle, sees as perceiving and desiring beings, though not rational ones—and the conscious life of human agents is the difference between being subject to one's desires and being the conscious subject of one's desires. In order to see the difference between these two stances, one must attend to the question of recognition. He commits himself to what he terms, following Scott Jenkins, a 'contextualist approach' to the problem of self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology* (5). (Cf. Scott Jenkins,

“Hegel’s Concept of Desire,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47, no. 1 [2009], pp. 109-130.) Such an approach takes seriously the limitations in the previous three chapters of the *Phenomenology*, i.e., that self-consciousness concerns the ‘possibility of intentional consciousness as such’ (5). In order to elaborate this claim, Pippin calls for a return to none other than Immanuel Kant.

The question of self-consciousness in Hegel must go through Kant’s understanding of self-consciousness as ‘a discriminating, unifying activity, paradigmatically as judging, and not as the passive recorder of sensory impressions’ (6). In other words, if Hegel remains true to Kant at least in this respect, then self-consciousness for Hegel must be understood in terms of its intentional activity rather than its passive receptivity. Furthermore, this consciousness exhibits a transcendental structure independent of empirical conditions, and the rules governing conscious activity are normative: they do not provide psychological rules for how the mind operates, but are instead ‘responsive to normative proprieties’ (8). Hegel agrees with Kant that consciousness is apperceptive, that in responding to the world, I am always already aware that it is I who am doing so—all consciousness is at least implicitly self-consciousness; but the self of which we are more or less aware as each of us make judgments is not an immanent object within the world, but rather the very condition for the possibility of the objects in the world appearing in their rule-governed unity.

If the basic unity of consciousness as apperception is what Hegel meant to elucidate in Chapter 4 of the *Phenomenology*, then he chose an interesting means to do so, to say the least. After all, Chapter 4 contains the well-known Lord-Bondsmen social structure (‘The Master-Slave Dialectic’) that would prove so decisive for the postwar French reception of Hegel. (For good overviews of this period in French thought and the role that the reception of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* played in it, cf. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* [Columbia University Press 1999]; and Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France 1927-1961* [Cornell University Press 2005].) As Pippin sees it, the key problem with Kojève’s reading of Hegel is that it essentially disregards the first three chapters of the *Phenomenology*. In other words, Kojève’s interpretation would force the reader to hold that although Hegel was interested in epistemological issues at the outset of the text, he abruptly changes course to the question of sociality when he gets to Chapter 4. But this makes little hermeneutic sense, for if Hegel offers in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* a developmental account of consciousness—self-consciousness understood as continuous with the collective agency of *Geist*—then it would be odd for Hegel to abandon this developmental account with an abrupt shift to the struggles inherent in human society; Hegel does not abandon the epistemological analysis of consciousness when he turns to the struggle for recognition in the fourth chapter.

John McDowell has recently offered an interpretation of Chapter 4 and the claims that consciousness must be construed as ‘desire itself’, an interpretation that avoids the anti-contextualist reading and its attendant problems. However, Pippin takes issue with McDowell’s reading as well. The problem is that McDowell reads this chapter allegorically. As a result, he reads the sociality of reason out of the chapter: the struggle

for mastery thereby becomes an attempt to reconcile the competing claims of an autonomous agency with a recalcitrant world. According to McDowell, there is as yet no ‘we’ to speak of; the sociality of reason has been completely scrubbed from this reading (10-15).

In opposition to both of these readings, Pippin proposes that self-consciousness be understood as a practical achievement. It is not a theoretical inspection of the self by itself but rather an attempt to assert oneself in the world and for others (19). We have little to dwell on this, because most of the time our assertion of self-consciousness proceeds smoothly. The struggle for recognition occurs because intentionality alone does not suffice for Hegel. In addition, an individual must realize this self-consciousness within the social world—it must be validated as such. There is an unavoidable dynamism to consciousness: it is not, it is only the process of becoming. In other words, consciousness is desire itself. This is the reason recognition proves so important to Hegel (and to Fichte): without it, there is no being to consciousness, only becoming. Self-consciousness requires a society for its achievement.

This book should appeal to readers interested in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially graduate students and researchers who wish to understand the contemporary significance of Hegel’s account of self-consciousness for McDowell and Brandom. Pippin has provided a lucid reading of these very dense passages. Regardless of whether one agrees with Pippin’s reading, it will prove difficult for Hegel scholars to ignore.

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