Desire and Hegel's Concept of Self-Consciousness

Abstract: This paper defends an interpretation of Hegel's account of self-consciousness as desire in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his later *Philosophy of Spirit.* That account is often taken to concern the merely animal aspect of human subjectivity and the role of natural life as the basis of human self-awareness. I argue that this is a misreading and that it obscures the more interesting role played by the concept of life in Hegel's understanding of self-consciousness and selfhood. Hegel, I argue, is engaging with a Kantian problem concerning two senses of self-identity and their corresponding forms of self-awareness – namely, my identity as a unified subject-of-consciousness (apperception) and my identity as unified object or substance. Hegel thinks that these apparently disparate forms of self-identity and self-awareness are in fact unified in the conscious activity of existing for oneself in a manner essentially connected to freedom and structurally analogous to the concept of natural life. His claim is that, *for* an apperceptively conscious subject, the internally purposive activity of destructive desire-satisfaction provides the most basic illustration of this unifying form of self-identity and the kind of self-consciousness that it involves.

1. Introduction

The famous "Self-Consciousness" chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* begins with an argument that the most basic form of self-consciousness is the satisfaction of one's immediate desires—specifically, the kind of desires whose gratification involves the destruction and consumption of their objects (ostensibly, desires like hunger). This is a surprising start to a chapter on self-consciousness, since, taken by themselves, such desires are common to all animals—not just rational or self-conscious ones. Why, then, does Hegel identify immediate desire-satisfaction as the most basic form of *self-consciousness*? And what is the operative concept of self-consciousness in that claim?

One of the most common approaches to this curious beginning addresses that issue by taking the opening subject of that chapter not to be self-consciousness proper but a kind of proto-self-awareness connected to the general animal drive for self-preservation (what Hegel elsewhere calls animal 'self-feeling').[1] I call this the 'desire-as-animality reading,' for it takes Hegel's account of desire to concern the standpoint of the human subject *qua* mere animal.[2] Under that approach, Hegel's treatment of immediate desire is taken to serve a kind of prefatory function. It

[1] Cf. SL 684, 686/GW 12:187, 12:189; EPN ¶¶357, 368, 373

[2] Varieties of this reading are found in Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, 22; Kojève, *Introduction*, 39; Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 19; Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 48; Brandom, "The Structure of Desire and Recognition, 130; Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, 6.

sets up the chapter's true topic by emphasizing the essential role of natural life and embodiment as the basis of all self-relating subjectivity, rational or not. At the same time, this privative understanding of the kind of self-awareness represented by 'desire' also plays an integral role in the standard readings of the account of social recognition that immediately follows. That account is widely understood as claiming that the need for recognition is introduced as a solution to the problem of overcoming the standpoint of mere biological drive allegedly represented by the earlier 'desire.'

However natural this reading of Hegel's account of desire may appear, it seems to require biting a rather large interpretive bullet. Since no one takes Hegel to be making the extraordinary claim that animal life as such is self-conscious (and rightly so), the desire-as-animality reading effectively requires the denial of the plain letter of the text. For in that chapter of the *Phenomenology*, in Hegel's later version of this account in his *Philosophy of Spirit*, and in his lectures on the topic, Hegel repeatedly identifies the kind of desire under discussion as a form of self-consciousness—something which, for Hegel, *distinguishes* us from mere animal life. Is there a way of understanding why *Phenomenology*, chapter IV begins in this way, without resorting to such interpretive measures?

My claim in this paper is that there is. I argue, first, that the desire-as-animality reading is demonstrably mistaken. More importantly, it conceals the account's highly novel contribution to the topic of self-consciousness by replacing it with a more commonplace claim regarding the natural, animal basis of human subjectivity. In fact, by assimilating Hegel's account of desire to the issue of mere animal life, the standard approach obscures the deeper function of the concept of life (or internal purposiveness) in Hegel's conception of the relation between self-consciousness, self-identity, and (ultimately) human freedom.

To begin, I argue (in section 2) that Hegel's topic is not immediate desire-satisfaction *tout court*, but immediate desire-satisfaction as it occurs by and for a distinctively human, thinking subject—an 'I.' Moreover, I argue that his account of desire—and its connection to recognition—becomes more intelligible by clarifying the operative sense of 'self-consciousness' in that account. It involves a kind of consciousness of one's independence (*Selbständigkeit*) that presupposes, but is not equivalent to, more general forms of human self-awareness. But to understand why Hegel regards such desire-satisfaction as the most basic form of self-consciousness, I argue (in section 3) that we must overcome a common misconception about Hegel's concept of self-consciousness more generally—namely, that it is a variant of Kant's notion of apperception. Instead, I argue, Hegel regards apperception as an integral but incomplete *part* of self-consciousness in the primary sense with which he is concerned. This incompleteness pertains to the fact that, as Kant himself insists, mere apperception is a purely formal and, in a sense, empty form of self-awareness—one that is seemingly disconnected from any consciousness of one's own substantial self-identity. Hegel's claim is that immediate desire-satisfaction (for an apperceptively aware subject) provides the most basic example of a form of self-consciousness that overcomes that emptiness.

In section 4, I examine why Hegel understands this self-consciousness as a consciousness of one's independence and why he views desire as the most basic example of this concept. I argue that, while his account of desire is already about a distinctively human form of self-consciousness, its very proximity to mere animal nutrition highlights an essential feature of the broader concept at issue—namely, that self-consciousness itself is a form of internal purposiveness, a form of life. It is a distinctive form of existing for oneself—that of human freedom. While desire only exhibits the most limited and deficient form of this 'existence-for-self,' the examination of why Hegel regards it as a form of self-consciousness at all will, I hope, shed some light on the broader concept and its connection to life and freedom.

2. Desire as Animality?

2.1 Self-Consciousness as Desire

The *Phenomenology's* chapter on "Self-Consciousness" opens with a brief discussion of the abstract concept of self-consciousness and its relation to the various 'shapes of knowing' discussed in the previous three chapters. But Hegel quickly gives a short argument whose conclusion is an apparent *identification* of the self-relation expressed by that abstract concept with the very self-relation exhibited by desire: "Self-consciousness is desire as such [*überhaupt*]" (*PhG* ¶167). This outright identification of self-consciousness with desire is a position which Hegel will shortly subject to critique. So, in his lectures on the topic, Hegel describes desire as only the "first and lowest level of self-consciousness" (*LPS* 186/GW 25.2: 783) and, in his *Encyclopedia*'s version of this discussion, as only "self-consciousness, in its immediacy" (*EPS* ¶426). But what kind of self-relation is involved in this "first and lowest level of self-consciousness"?

Hegel explains this self-relation as one which is mediated by a negative relation to an externally given sensible object, writing:

> Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which however *for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative*; and the second, viz. *itself*, which is the true essence and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object [*im Gegensatz des ersten*]. In this sphere, self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis [*Gegensatz*] is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it. (*PhG* ¶167)

Hegel describes this initial, negative attitude toward the external object of desire (the 'first object') as one of being "certain of the nothingness of this other" (*PhG* ¶174), or as one which views its object as "an enduring existence [*ein Bestehen*] which, however, is only *appearance*, or a difference which, *in itself*, is no difference" (*PhG* ¶167). His claim is not that, from the perspective of desire, the object is viewed as a mere illusion or a mere subjective representation. What, from this perspective, is a mere 'appearance' is only that the object is something

absolutely enduring, 'self-standing' (*selbständig*), and 'other' to me, like an immutable reality and external limit. The subject of desire views its object, rather, as something inherently destructible and conformable to itself.

Thus Hegel claims that "self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis [*Gegensatz*] is removed"—that is, it exhibits itself as the *satisfaction* of desire, in which the object's original otherness or opposition to the subject is overcome (*aufgehoben*), and in which the desiring subject's original certainty of itself and of the 'nullity' of its object is confirmed. Hegel identifies this *Aufhebung* with the literal destruction and consumption of the object (*EPS* ¶428). Thus, the desiring subject "destroys the independent [*selbständigen*] object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*" (*PhG* ¶174).

This account of self-consciousness-as-desire contains two especially striking features whose explanation will guide the rest of this paper. In one respect, the kind of self-relation Hegel discusses appears to involve *more* than what one might expect under the heading of 'self-consciousness'—for instance, an awareness of one's mind or the capacity for 'I-thoughts.' Rather, he seems to be treating a more robust form of self-*validation*: the objective certification of my own self-sufficiency or 'self-standingness' (*Selbständigkeit*) and the corresponding *Unselbständigkeit* of the external, sensible objects of my desire. In satisfying my desire by destroying and consuming my object, I prove *myself* to be the persisting, determining element in that relation—das *Selbständige*. [3]

In another respect, however, this self-relation may appear to be something *less* than what one might otherwise expect in a discourse about self-consciousness, for the content of this form of desire appears to be *hunger*. But this naturally raises the difficult interpretive question with which I introduced this paper: Why would Hegel begin his account of self-consciousness—something typically attributed only to rational animals—by discussing an activity (hunger-satisfaction) which is common to all animal life, rational or not? In short, what is the conception of 'self-consciousness' which Hegel takes to be exhibited by desire-satisfaction? Let's begin by examining this last question.

2.2 The 'Desire-as-Animality' Reading

The simplest answer to this question is that, despite his talk of desire as a form of self-consciousness, Hegel is *not* describing a self-relation unique to rational animals. Rather, his account of immediate desire-satisfaction concerns a kind of self-relation common to animal life generally. Beyond the considerations already mentioned, this approach finds *prima facie* support

[3] The term *Selbständigkeit*, which is central not only to Hegel's account of self-consciousness but to the *Phenomenology* as a whole, is often translated as 'independence,' 'self-sufficiency,' or 'self-subsistence,' and I too will use these terms to translate it. I will also sometimes the neologism 'self-standingness.' The reason is that the notion of being 'self-standing' in Hegel also has a deeper and essential connotation of that which is truly *substantial* and thus that which persists through its own self—a point I return to below. In his lectures on Spinoza, Hegel summarizes Spinoza's definition of substance as "das schlechthin Selbstständige—'the purely self-standing'(GW 30.2: 715).

in two well-known features of the *Phenomenology*'s "Self-Consciousness" chapter. First, Hegel inserts a lengthy discussion of natural life in the middle of his account of desire (¶¶168-172). Second, his subsequent critique of desire and transition to recognition is followed by the depiction of a mortal struggle, in which each combatant aims to demonstrate a kind of transcendence of natural life by staking his own life and the other's in a 'struggle for recognition.' Together, these factors appear to support a common understanding of the structure of *PhG* IV—namely, that the function of immediate 'desire' in Hegel's account is precisely to represent a merely animal self-relation that recognition is meant to overcome.

Thus, Heikki Ikäheimo describes Hegel's account of desire and recognition as "centrally about how humans overcome or sublate mere animality, or a merely animal form of life through recognition".[4] Brandom states that the transition from desire to recognition "corresponds to a shift from consideration of particular merely *biological* creatures impelled wholly by *natural impulses*, in relation to their species, on the one hand, to consideration of genuinely *social* self-conscious individuals motivated by normative relations of *authority* and *responsibility* within their communities, on the other."[5] Axel Honneth expresses a similar sentiment: "Hegel thus seeks to do no less than explain the transition from a natural to a spiritual being, from the human animal to the rational subject."[6]

In this vein, Judith Butler explicitly identifies the standpoint of 'desire' with animal nutritive life as such: "Introduced at this juncture in the text, the term [desire] clearly acquires the meaning of animal hunger; the sensuous and perceptual world is desired in the sense that it is required for consumption and is the means for the reproduction of life."[7] Robert Pippin expresses a similar view: "In a way that is typical of his procedure, [Hegel] tries to begin with the most theoretically thin or simple form of the required self-relation and so first considers the mere sentiment of self that a living being has in keeping itself alive, where keeping itself alive reflects this minimal reflective attentiveness to self."[8]

This reading appears to find indirect support in the striking similarity between the *Phenomenology*'s account of desire and the *Logic*'s discussion of animal nutritive life (what Hegel calls the 'Life-Process'). There Hegel writes:

> The subject [the living individual] is a purpose unto itself, the concept that has its means and subjective reality in the objectivity subjugated to it. As such, it is constituted as the idea existing in and for itself and as an essentially self-subsistent being [*das wesentliche Selbständige*], as against which the presupposed external world has the value only of something negative and without self-subsistence [*Unselbständigen*]. In its self-feeling [*Selbstgefühl*] the living being has the certainty of the intrinsic nullity of the otherness

[4] *Recognition*, 69
[5] *Spirit of Trust*, 246
[6] "From Desire to Recognition," 77
[7] *Subjects of Desire*, 33
[8] *Hegel on Self-Consciousness,* 19

> confronting it. Its impulse is the need to sublate this otherness and to give itself the truth of this certainty. (*SL* 684/GW 12:187)

In this passage, we find an explicit description of the 'mere sentiment of self' (Hegel's *Selbstgefühl*) that Pippin and others identify with the standpoint of immediate desire in *PhG* IV.[9] Without a doubt, Hegel clearly sees an important commonality between the self-relations described in these two contexts. The question is whether he understands them simply as one and the same.

I will argue that he does not. Instead, he is making a similar conceptual point about two distinct (if closely related) forms of self-relation: mere animal self-feeling and human self-consciousness. In fact, a closer examination of the apparent evidence for the desire-as-animality reading will show that, in *PhG* IV, Hegel is talking about desire as a basic, but distinctively human form of self-consciousness—one that he portrays as already transcending the standpoint of animal life and the mere drive for survival. To see why, we may begin by examining some basic difficulties with the desire-as-animality reading.

2.3 The Proleptic Reading of Desire

The most striking obstacle to the desire-as-animality reading is Hegel's repeated statement that "self-consciousness is desire" (*PhG* ¶¶167, 174). Indeed, he refers to the subject of desire as "the I"—even stating that it "has itself as pure I for object" (cf. *EPS* ¶¶427-429; *PhG* ¶173-4). These unavoidable features of the text cast doubt on the view that Hegel is talking about a purely animalistic mode of self-relation. Brandom bites these bullets—maintaining that Hegel's account is about a feature of animal life generally that marks a step toward self-consciousness.[10] Others, without identifying the kind of *subject* under discussion as a literal brute, nonetheless take the self-relation involved in immediate desire to be a merely animal feeling of natural life. Gadamer writes, "For in fact, in its immediacy it is the vital certainty of being alive."[11] "But for just that reason this sensuous feeling of self [*Selbstgefühl*] is not true self-consciousness [*Selbstbewußtsein*]."[12] That approach could perhaps accommodate Hegel's referring to the desiring subject as 'the I,' but it does not explain his repeated statements that the very *self-relation* under discussion exhibits the concept of self-*consciousness*.

Others have attempted to read Hegel's initial claim that self-consciousness is desire only *proleptically*—that is, as anticipating forms of desiderative consciousness that go beyond the immediate desire and consumption Hegel initially describes. Variations on this strategy are found, for instance, in Pippin, Butler, and Jenkins. Pippin interprets Hegel's identification of self-consciousness with desire as expressive of a more general view concerning the

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[9] Cf. Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic*, 61; Kojève, *Introduction*, 39. Pippin's term 'sentiment of self' originates as the standard English translation of Kojève's French translation (*sentiment de soi*) of Hegel's *Selbstgefühl*, under which he subsumes immediate desire.
[10] Cf. *Spirit of Trust,* 249
[11] *Hegel's Dialectic*, 60
[12] *Hegel's Dialectic*, 61

"apperceptive nature of consciousness."[13] Namely, in all its various forms, self-consciousness is never a direct self-apprehension but a "practical *achievement* of sorts"— a self-relation accomplished through an active relation to the outer world.[14] On this view, the immediate desire and consumption Hegel discusses is meant to provide the most basic illustration of this highly general structure. But for Pippin, as for Butler and Jenkins, desire only emerges as a form of *self-consciousness* by transcending the immediacy of that initial form in the context of social recognition.[15] Jenkins, for instance, argues that *self-conscious* desire first emerges through the restrained desire of the bondsman serving the master.[16]

This is a sophisticated approach to Hegel's text. Its main problem, however, is that both in the *Phenomenology* and in the corresponding section of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, the form of self-consciousness that Hegel specifically identifies with desire is precisely that of immediate desire and the satisfaction obtained in destroying and consuming one's object. In fact, throughout the *Phenomenology*, Hegel employs the term *Begierde* to distinguish this basic, destructive attitude from more developed forms of practical intention. For instance, he later alludes to the story of Faust, considering his pursuit of unrestrained enjoyment through an embrace of "the Spirit of the earth," and he describes that attitude as follows: "Its action is only in one respect an action of *desire* [*Begierde*]. It does not aim at the destruction of objective being in its entirety, but only at the form of its otherness or its independence" (*PhG*, ¶¶361-2). Indeed, Hegel employs this same distinction between destroying one's object and simply removing its 'otherness' to distinguish desire from the bondsman's *work*:

> Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence. Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*. (*PhG* ¶195)

The proleptic reading is quite right that Hegel's account of immediate desire-satisfaction introduces broader themes in his conception of self-consciousness—for instance, that it involves an active relation to my objects in which I overcome their sheer 'otherness.' It is also right that that the concept of self-consciousness is more adequately realized in more advanced forms of human activity. As Hegel says, "Desire is the first and lowest level of self-consciousness" (*LPS* 186/GW 25.2:783). But the claim that Hegel's initial identification of desire with self-consciousness refers *exclusively* to these more advanced forms is not supported by the text. On

[13] *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 14.
[14] *Hegel on Self-Consciousness,* 14-16.
[15] Cf. Butler, *Subjects of Desire,* 41; Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 38, Jenkins, "Hegel's Concept of Desire," 125-6
[16] "Hegel's Concept of Desire," 126.

the contrary, 'desire' in Hegel's account appears to specifically pick out the extreme form of overcoming the object's 'otherness' by literally assimilating it to oneself.

Without a doubt, there are obvious ways in which immediate desire is quite animalistic in its relation to its object. And, however Hegel understands the distinction between self-consciousness and mere animal self-*feeling*, clearly that difference is far less pronounced in immediate desire-satisfaction than in more cultivated forms of human activity. Indeed, in the passage quoted above, Hegel does refer to the 'self-feeling' achieved in that satisfaction (PhG ¶195). But one can also *feel* what one is conscious of, and Hegel frequently employs the term 'self-feeling' in discussing distinctively human experiences.[17] By contrast, whenever Hegel is explicitly discussing mere animal life, he *never* employs the term 'self-consciousness' but *only* 'self-feeling.'[18] There is a systematic reason for this. Hegel reserves the term *consciousness Bewußtsein*) for a distinctively human form of intentionality that he distinguishes from mere animal sensibility: "Animals also have souls [i.e. sentience] but not consciousness" (*LPS* 163/GW 25.2: 746). I'll return to this point in section 3, but the fact that Hegel repeatedly characterizes the immediate desire of *PhG* IV as a form of consciousness and self-consciousness remains a significant obstacle to any version of the desire-as-animality reading.

2.4 Two Senses of 'Self-consciousness'

The simplest way to avoid these difficulties is to deny the desire-as-animality reading altogether—that is, to maintain that, from the outset of Hegel's account, he is not discussing a purely animalistic self-relation but a genuine (if quite basic) example of a distinctively human form of self-consciousness. Timothy Brownlee has recently endorsed this view, and H.S. Harris similarly insists that the kind of immediate desire Hegel discusses is already "self-conscious desire," not mere animal appetite.[19] I think this is the right approach and will examine its grounds and consequences in what follows.

But the question this immediately raises is how to understand 'self-conscious desire' in relation to Hegel's initial claim that self-consciousness *is* desire. But this brings us back to a broader difficulty I noted at the end of section 2.1. In a certain respect, the kind of 'self-consciousness' identified with desire-satisfaction appears to involve a more robust form of self-relation than, say, the capacity for I-thoughts. Namely, it involves a form of objectively validating one's *Selbständigkeit* through action. Indeed, this same theme remains the focus of Hegel's account of a mortal struggle for recognition and the relation of mastery and servitude. The self-consciousness to be *achieved* by winning the other's recognition of one's independence is not the mere capacity for I-thoughts or the basic forms of self-awareness that distinguish us from mere animals. The surrendering party to that struggle may have ultimately failed to validate the inner certainty of his independence, but he neither enters nor emerges from the battle as

[17] Cf. *PhG* ¶¶218, 665
[18] Cf. *PhG* ¶258; *SL* 684/GW 12:187, *SL* 686/GW 12:189; *EPN* ¶¶357, 368, 373
[19] Cf. Brownlee, *Recognition and the Self*, 54-5; Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 328.

Aristotle's "poor man's slave"—i.e. an unthinking brute (*Politics* 1252b12). But a similar distinction, I suggest, is required to make sense of Hegel's account of self-consciousness as desire.

I'll examine this distinction in greater detail in sections 3 and 4, but I'll briefly state my position in advance, as I believe it will help illuminate some of Hegel's curious statements about life and desire that I'll discuss shortly. My claim is that Hegel's accounts of both desire and recognition become far more intelligible once we see that the central topic of *PhG* IV is not simply the more general form of self-aware intentionality that distinguishes human consciousness from mere animal sensibility. Nor is he talking merely about the apperceptive nature of consciousness. As I'll discuss in section 3, Hegel does regard distinctively human forms of consciousness as 'apperceptive' in a sense closely connected to Kant's concept, but that more general form of self-aware intentionality is just what Hegel calls *consciousness*. By contrast, what he is calling *self*-consciousness concerns a more robust form of self-*knowledge*—one that, in both desire and recognition, presupposes but is not equivalent to self-awareness in the former sense.[20] It is the consciousness of *what I am* or what sort of being I am. The content of the 'self-certainty' under discussion is that I am something 'self-standing'—indeed, something more truly self-standing than the given, sensible objects of my desire. And I know this by *making it true*—by actualizing what is otherwise a mere potentiality or disposition.

Accordingly, my position is that the desire under discussion is, in the first instance, 'self-conscious desire' in the sense that Hegel is not talking about a purely animal mode of sensibility but, rather, immediate desire as it appears in and for a distinctively human subject—an 'I.' But the sense in which the satisfaction of this desire *is* 'self-consciousness' (in its most basic form) is that it is the most rudimentary way that a human subject knows itself by certifying its *Selbständigkeit*. Again, all these points will need to be further explained in what follows, and in s 3 and 4, I examine *why* Hegel understands 'self-consciousness' in this way and how it is related to apperceptive awareness more generally.

Yet even if this position is right, it still seems to leave open the possibility that Hegel's account of desire is about the human subject's affirmation of its *Selbständigkeit* purely in the sense of animal self-subsistence and the drive to preserve its natural life. In that case, we might still understand the transition from desire to recognition as essentially about the distinction between the human qua animal and the human qua self-conscious subject. In fact, Hegel's account of desire includes an explicit discussion of the distinction between mere life and self-conscious life. If the core of the desire-as-animality reading is correct, then one should expect Hegel to identify immediate desire with the *life* side of that relation. But, on closer inspection, what we find is just the opposite.

[20] Cf. Brownlee, *Recognition and the Self*, 47

2.5 Life as the Object of Desire

Hegel's discussion of life in *PhG* IV begins with the claim that life—and specifically, 'a living thing' (*ein Lebendiges*)—is the 'object' of immediate desire (¶168). Some have read this as meaning that the desiring subject's *own natural life* is its 'object' in the sense that it is the subject's constitutive *end* and thus defines the perspective through which it views the external world.[21] Others similarly read Hegel as claiming that the subject's own living body is the object of its desire in the sense that it is the object of its care and concern. In both cases, 'life' is taken as a characterization of the *subject* of desire, not of the given, external object that the subject aims to destroy. This reading is demonstrably false.

The claim that life is the object of desire immediately follows Hegel's description of the 'double object' of self-consciousness as desire: "one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which however *for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative*; and the second, viz. *itself*, which is the true essence and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object" (¶167). But, in the discussion of life which follows this passage, Hegel identifies 'life' and '*ein Lebendiges*,' not with the *second object* (the subject itself) but, rather, with the first, external object:

> But *for us*, or *in itself*, the object which for self-consciousness is *the negative element* [my emphasis] has, on its side, returned into itself, just as on the other side consciousness has done. Through this reflection into itself the object has become Life. What self-consciousness distinguishes from itself as having *being*, also has in it, insofar 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* [*ein Lebendiges*]. (¶168)

That is, Hegel's characterization of life as "the object which for self-consciousness is the negative element" is a clear and direct reference to what Hegel had just two sentences prior described as the "immediate object, that [...] has the character of a *negative*"—the given, external object of consciousness toward which desire is a negative, destructive attitude.

In fact, Hegel both opens and closes his discussion of life by contrasting self-consciousness and mere natural life. In both places, he immediately discusses desire insofar as it exemplifies the former and insofar as it assumes a negative, destructive relation to merely natural life (¶¶168; 173-4). Thus, he concludes his treatment of life by contrasting the organic 'genus-process' with self-consciousness, which he describes as "genus on its own account" (*PhG* ¶173). And he writes:

[21] Cf. Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 46; Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology*, 48

> The simple 'I' is this genus or the simple universal, for which the differences are *not* differences only by its being the *negative essence* of the shaped independent moments [i.e. individual living beings]; and self-consciousness is certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; *self-consciousness is desire* [my emphasis]. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner" (*PhG* ¶174)

This passage concludes Hegel's positive account of desire, prior to his transition to recognition. Here, having just distinguished mere life from self-consciousness, Hegel identifies desire with the latter and repeats the basic outline with which his account of desire began: in immediate desire-satisfaction, the self-conscious subject validates its self-certainty by destroying the erstwhile independent object of its desire (an "independent life").[22] Proponents of the desire-as-animality reading are right that Hegel sees an important comparison between life and self-consciousness. But Hegel explicitly places the desire under discussion on the *self-consciousness* side of that comparison, by direct contrast to mere life. This point stands in conflict with all varieties of the desire-as-animality reading. For the core idea which unites them is that this immediate, destructive form of desire essentially represents a purely animalistic self-relation that is overcome only through recognition. The text does not support that reading.

On the contrary, it suggests that desire, considered as a form of self-consciousness, already places itself above the merely living—if only in a quite rudimentary way. It views the latter as something qualitatively 'other' and 'negative,' and it asserts this superiority by destroying it. In this respect, I agree with Karen Ng's emphasis on the *continuity* between this attitude of 'desire' and the further developments of "Self-Consciousness." She writes: "as soon as self-consciousness as desire and its living object appear on the scene, self-consciousness acts to negate life, first in the object outside itself (eating the object, killing the other), and second, in its own self by risking its life and denying life's significance for the actualization of its freedom."[23]

In sum, the fact that Hegel identifies the subject of immediate desire as an "I" does not appear to be incidental to his understanding of the self-relation under discussion—as though he

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[22] Hegel's talk of self-consciousness as 'genus for itself' is often understood as directly expressing the view that self-consciousness is inherently 'universal' in a specifically social sense. (Cf. Jenkins, "Self-Consciousness in the Phenomenology," 98.) But, in the quoted passage the 'genus' character of self-consciousness is not explained in terms of a relationship to any other self-conscious subject but, rather, as characterizing one self-conscious subject's destructive relation to a mere *Lebendiges*. Hegel's meaning here is complex, but in short, he is drawing a comparison to a specific aspect of the organic 'genus'—namely, that in the persisting life of the kind, each of its individual members is, as it were, used up in the process: "In the process of the genus, the isolated singularities of individual life perish" (SL 688, GW 12.191). In like manner, Hegel is claiming, in desire, the self-conscious subject reduces the living individuals it consumes to mere subordinate moments of its own form of life. It is, in this sense, "the negative essence of the shaped individual moments [i.e. particular individuals]" (PhG ¶174).

[23] *Hegel's Concept of Life*, 115. I would qualify her claim by noting that the combatants in Hegel's struggle are not to be understood as so brazenly indifferent to life as some parts of the text suggest. On this point, cf. *EPS* par.432.

were considering a human subject merely in respect of its animal drive for self-preservation. Rather, for Hegel, an admittedly quite animalistic form of self-assertion nonetheless takes on a distinctive significance for a human subject. It contains the most basic form of the subject's 'certainty' of a particular kind of *Selbständigkeit*—one that, while closely connected to life itself, nonetheless places itself above mere animal life.

This is not to deny that such destructive desire remains a rather brutish form of asserting one's independence (though, for that matter, so is the physical conquest and subjugation of another). But by recognizing that the desire in Hegel's account *is* a form of human self-consciousness—not merely an anticipation of it—we shall be better able to investigate the broader concept it instantiates. Now, as I suggested in section 2.3, we can make better sense of the matter by first seeing why the 'self-consciousness' at issue is not merely the general *form* of self-aware intentionality that distinguishes us from mere brutes. Rather, it concerns a kind of self-knowledge *cum* self-actualization of one's real *independence*—one that requires, but is not equivalent to, human consciousness in general. As we'll see, the more general form of self-aware intentionality that Hegel calls *consciousness* is closely related to Kant's notion of apperception. Our task, then, is to explain the concept of self-consciousness introduced in his account of desire and how this self-relation is connected to apperceptive consciousness more generally.

3. Desire and the Concept of Self-Consciousness

3.1 Self-Consciousness beyond Apperception

Kant draws a sharp distinction between self-consciousness (apperception) and self-cognition (*CPR* B158). As we'll see, Hegel's concept of self-consciousness does not quite correspond to either of these Kantian concepts, and there are principled reasons for this. He thinks they both concern only partial and one-sided forms of self-consciousness. But to bring his own concept of self-consciousness into clearer view, we may begin by briefly articulating Kant's distinction between these two forms of self-awareness.

Kant maintains that all consciousness (whatever its particular object) inherently involves a form of self-awareness which is expressed by 'I,' 'I think.' He calls this self-consciousness *apperception.* Kant takes this self-awareness to involve an awareness of a certain kind of self-identity—my identity as *one* subject of consciousness in relation to (and in distinction from) the diverse and ever-changing contents of my immediate awareness. I will return to these points below.

But Kant distinguishes this general apperceptive awareness from the *particular* consciousness in which I am not merely aware of myself as the knowing subject but am also the *object* of my knowledge. Kant calls this 'self-cognition,' in contrast with self-consciousness (*CPR* B158). For Kant, this is the key difference between the two. Self-consciousness (as apperception) is precisely *not* a relation to myself as the object of my consciousness. As he puts it, "this consciousness [apperception] is not even a representation distinguishing a particular

object, but rather a form of representation in general, insofar as it is to be called cognition" (*CPR* A346/B404).

Readers of *PhG* IV often identify the target concept of that chapter as a form of this apperceptive awareness. Thus, when Robert Pippin identifies the topic of *PhG* IV as "the apperceptive nature of consciousness," he is especially referring to Kant's idea that self-consciousness is in no way a matter of having oneself as one's *object* but is, rather, a form of relating to the objects of consciousness in general. Pippin writes: "The self-relation in relation to an object that has emerged as a topic from the first three chapters is not a relation to an object of any kind, and so involves no grasp of anything. (The subject of the world is not, that is, any kind of object in the world)."[24]

In fact, the concept of 'self-consciousness' with which Hegel introduces *PhG* IV is *precisely* a kind of consciousness in which I, the subject of consciousness, am *myself* the object of consciousness. Hegel writes that "Self-consciousness [...] has itself as pure 'I' for object" (*PhG* ¶173); and again, "Self-consciousness is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else. For it, its essence and absolute object is 'I'" (*PhG* ¶186). In the *Encyclopaedia* "Phenomenology," Hegel explicitly distinguishes 'Consciousness' from 'Self-Consciousness' in terms of the object: "(a) consciousness in general, with an object set against it; (b) self-consciousness, for which *I* is the object" (¶417). And again, in the *Encyclopedia* transition from 'Consciousness' to 'Self-Consciousness,' he writes: "The I in its judgment has an object which is not distinct from it— it has itself. Consciousness has passed into self-consciousness" (¶423). Hegel's understanding of this 'self-objectification' is quite different from Kant's conception of self-cognition. Nonetheless, it does concern a form of self-*knowledge* that is not to be found in apperception alone.

This is not to deny that, for Hegel as for Kant, all consciousness involves a form of apperceptive self-awareness—even when the object of my awareness is something other than myself. But this self-aware relation to another is not what Hegel calls 'self-consciousness' but simply 'consciousness.' Thus, in the Introduction to the text, Hegel writes: "Consciousness simultaneously *distinguishes* itself from something, and at the same time *relates* itself to it, or, as it is said, this something exists *for* consciousness; and the determinate aspect of this *relating*, or of the *being* of something for a consciousness, is *knowing*" (*PhG* ¶82). In speaking consciousness's simultaneous activity of relating to an object and distinguishing itself from it, Hegel is not simply referring to the subject's ability to distinguish itself, as an individual, from the things it perceives outside itself. That kind of self-other distinction is, for Hegel, already an essential element of animal sensibility and self-feeling. Rather, he's referring to a manner of distinguishing my awareness itself from the objective reality of which I am aware.

How Hegel understands this is a subtle point that I return to in section 4. But in short, he's giving abbreviated expression to Kant's idea that, in consciousness, I'm aware of my representations as *mine* even while (or precisely *by*) referring their contents to an independent

[24] *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 44

objective order ('relating them to an object,' as Kant also puts it).[25] This structure of distinguishing my consciousness from its object *in* relating to it is illustrated, for instance, in the sentence, 'I think S is P'—though, like Kant, Hegel is by no means claiming that the apperceptive structure of consciousness is only present in explicit 'I-thoughts.'

In fact, the subject's awareness of its own consciousness in relation to and in distinction from its objects forms the basis of the entire discourse of the *Phenomenology*, from the very first chapter. Thus, already in chapter one ('Sense-Certainty'), the subject's reflection on itself as the knowing 'I'—the *subject* of that sense-certainty—forms one of the central parts of its dialectic (¶¶90-93; 100-105).[26] Of course, the exact nature of consciousness's awareness of itself in the knowledge of its objects is an ongoing topic of investigation throughout the *Phenomenology.* Hegel does not simply begin (or end) with a wholesale adoption of Kant's concept of apperception as the form of consciousness in general. But the idea all consciousness involves a kind of apperceptive awareness is not a result of the previous three chapters which thus introduces the fourth. That idea was present and explicitly at work all along. But in the beginning of chapter IV, Hegel introduces self-consciousness as a "new shape of knowing [*Wissen*], the knowing of itself [*Wissen von sich selbst*]" distinguished from "that which preceded, viz. the knowing of another" (*PhG* ¶167). If all that Hegel meant by self-consciousness were the awareness of my own knowing *in* knowing another, then this would simply be another version of the "shape of knowing" that had been under discussion from the very outset under the name 'consciousness.' The new shape of knowing in chapter IV is one in which the subject of consciousness has *itself* as the *object* of its knowledge. As noted earlier, it is a consciousness of *what I am*, what kind of being I am.

In fact, Hegel's dispute with Kant's view of self-consciousness has less to do with Kant's notion of apperception *per se* and far more to do with his understanding of its relation to self-knowledge. While Hegel agrees that these are not simply the same, he views these two forms of self-relation (properly conceived) as far more intimately connected than they are for Kant. That is, *if* self-knowledge is understood in terms of relating to myself essentially as I would to any given object of inquiry, then this form of 'having myself as my object' would indeed be radically distinct from the kind of self-awareness involved in apperception (as it is for Kant). But, for Hegel, this conception of self-cognition presupposes a loaded (and deeply mistaken) conception of its object—namely, that it is (or, *I am*) something whose nature and identity is simply *there*, independently of my awareness, like some strange bug that I might investigate (the unknown "I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks" (*CPR* A346/B404)).

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[25] Cf. *CPR* A197/B243

[26] Moreover, as Timothy Brownlee notes in this connection (*Recognition and the Self,* 46) the transition from chapter one to chapter two ('Perception') is already defined by the subject's recognition of the *positive* role of its active conceptualizing activities in uniting the manifold in its experience and knowing the object truly. This view of knowledge as an 'active taking' is precisely what defines the topic of that second chapter: "I take it [the object] up then as it is in truth, and instead of knowing something immediate I take the truth of it, or *perceive* it [*nehme ich wahr*]." (*PhG* ¶66). I recommend Brownlee's critique of apperception-based readings of Hegel's 'self-consciousness'.

Indeed, Kant's ambivalent use of first-personal, third-personal, and impersonal pronouns to refer to such an object expresses what, for Hegel, is the central problem with such a view—namely, that the identity of myself (as a self-aware subject) with such an object is entirely ambiguous and seemingly unintelligible. In a point I'll return to in section 4, Hegel describes this conception of self-knowledge as the result of treating 'I' as a "mere representation"—that is, as a kind of ordinary referring term (like a name) which indicates something independent of my awareness. In the *Science of Logic*, he writes:

> Of course, if the "I" is not grasped conceptually but is taken as a mere representation, in the way we talk about it in everyday consciousness, then it is an abstract determination, and not the self-reference that has itself for its object [*Gegenstand*]. Then it is only one of the extremes, a one-sided subject without its objectivity; or else just an object without subjectivity, which it would be were it not for the awkwardness just touched upon, namely that the thinking subject will not be left out of the "I" as object." (*SL* 692/GW 12: 195)

Herein, I think, lies the deeper oversight of a reading like Pippin's, which claims that Hegel's 'self-consciousness' "is not a relation to an object of any kind, and so involves no grasp of anything. (The subject of the world is not, that is, any kind of object in the world)."[27] What Pippin seems to be denying here (and rightly so) is that Hegel understands self-consciousness to be a *mere* relation to an object like any other (but which happens to be me). But Pippin apparently treats the only alternative to *that* sense of being my own object as something like Kantian apperception, in which I am aware of myself only as knowing *subject*, not the object known. In effect, Pippin is repeating (and attributing to Hegel) precisely the kind of Kantian dichotomy which Hegel describes as "barbarous" (*SL* 691/GW 12: 194). It is a dichotomy which leaves us with a picture of the *self* as either a mere 'one-sided subject without objectivity' (a 'subject of the world that is not any kind of object in it') or else a 'one-sided object without subjectivity'—either a mere consciousness or a mere thing.

For Hegel, the way out of this disjointed picture of the self is not to deny any distinction between apperception and objective self-knowledge. Instead, the true course is an alternative account of objective self-knowledge—one in which the concept of the object known (myself) properly corresponds to the concept of the knowing subject (the 'I' of apperception). On such an account, apperception will no longer appear to be a radically disparate form of self-relation altogether but, rather, an essential (but by itself incomplete) component or 'moment' of self-knowledge. Thus, rather than identifying apperception with self-consciousness and distinguishing this from self-knowledge (as Kant does), Hegel himself reserves the term 'self-consciousness' for the concept of the whole (self-knowledge) of which apperception is essentially an incomplete *part*.

[27] *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 44

3.2 Desire and the Problem of Self-Objectification

But how exactly are we to understand Hegel's alternative conception of 'making myself an object' and its relation to apperception? For the purposes of this paper, I must mainly limit my analysis of the question to the topic at hand—desire. To answer it, we need to further develop three points, previously introduced:

(1) For Hegel, as for Kant, all consciousness is apperceptive and contains an awareness of myself as one consciousness in relation to the various contents and objects of my awareness. This apperceptive self-awareness in general is expressed by 'I.'

(2) Hegel defines *self*-consciousness as a consciousness in which I am not only (as in all consciousness) aware of myself as subject, but also have myself, *the subject*, as the *object* of my knowledge.

(3) In self-consciousness as desire-satisfaction, this 'self-objectification' takes the specific form of objectively validating my subjective 'self-certainty'—the certainty of my own *Selbständigkeit* vis-à-vis the given, sensible objects of my desire. Indeed, this is precisely how Hegel describes 'desire' in the *Encyclopaedia* 'Phenomenology': "As this certitude of self against the object, it is the impulse to realize its implicit nature [*was es an sich ist*], by giving its abstract self-knowledge content and objectivity" (¶425).

Thus, the central question is this: In what sense does the objective validation of my *Selbständigkeit* (through the destruction of my object) amount to making myself, *qua* subject-of-consciousness, into my own *object*? The key to answering this question involves Hegel's conception of the relation between the forms of 'self-identity' which correspond to apperception and objective self-knowledge, respectively—namely, (1) my identity as a unified subject-of-consciousness in relation to the manifold contents and objects of my awareness; and (2) my objective, substantial identity as a determinate being. Like Kant, Hegel regards the former as a mere "formal identity" and something, by itself, quite empty (*EPS* ¶315). But Hegel takes this 'formal identity' to be closely connected, conceptually, to my corresponding *real* or substantial identity. Specifically, he takes this 'formal identity' to be *itself* already a kind of 'ideal' and implicit (*an sich*) independence vis-à-vis the manifold contents and objects of my immediate awareness—a product of, as it were, extricating myself as a subject from the "whole expanse of the sensuous world" (*PhG* ¶167) and viewing it as though from without, as a mere other, a 'not-I.'

Accordingly, Hegel understands the relation between this merely formal identity and a corresponding objective identity in terms of making the merely 'ideal' or *an sich,* independence of the former something *für sich*, by objectively realizing that independence through one's own activity. This is how I make myself, my own subjectivity, into my object. To see what all this means, we need to first examine Hegel's reinterpretation of Kant's notion of the 'emptiness' of

the 'I' of apperception and its connection to the destructiveness of desire. Specifically, we need to see why, for Hegel, this emptiness should not be understood as a mere absence of information about myself (a vacuous self-representation), but rather as a kind of "abstract freedom" (*EPS* ¶413) inherently connected to my self-identity as *one* subject of consciousness. This, as we will see, is the 'abstract' or wholly negative freedom which, in desire, first becomes 'objective to itself.'

4. Independence and Self-Consciousness

4.1 Hegel, Kant, and the Empty 'I'

To see how and why Hegel reinterprets the emptiness of apperceptive self-awareness not as a mere self-ignorance but a kind of 'abstract freedom,' let me briefly return to an earlier topic—Hegel's objection to Kant's treatment of 'the I' as a 'mere representation' (and an empty one at that).

This objection is principally directed toward one aspect of Kant's view of self-consciousness, which I will discuss in a moment. In another important respect (of which Hegel generally approves), Kant does *not* view the 'I' of apperception as 'representational' in the sense which Hegel disparages. For Kant, 'I' expresses one's consciousness of "the thoroughgoing identity of ourselves with regard to all representations that can ever belong to our cognition" (*CPR* A116).[28] This 'self-identity' denotes the identity of my one consciousness in relation to the diverse and fluctuating contents of my awareness. But Kant emphatically distinguishes this self-identity (and my awareness of it) from that of something *given*, like the kind of object of inner sense that Hume searched for in vain, only finding a series of perceptions.[29] Rather, it is *produced* by an activity in which I synthetically grasp (in one consciousness) the objective connection of the various contents of my awareness. My awareness of this unified consciousness is not, then, a kind of *perception* of something (myself) which is independent of that consciousness. It is, rather, an awareness of a unity-of-consciousness which is achieved by combining the 'manifold' in an objective way. This is why Kant writes: "this consciousness [of myself] is not even a representation distinguishing a particular object, but rather a form of representation in general, insofar as it is to be called cognition" (*CPR* A346/B404).

At the same time, however, for Kant, 'I' *does* function as a kind of representation, and indeed what he calls "an indeterminate empirical intuition, i.e., a perception" (*CPR* B422). He writes: "In the transcendental synthesis of the manifold of representations in general, on the contrary, hence in the synthetic original unity of apperception, I am conscious of myself not as I

[28] Kant consistently defines apperception in terms of self-identity (and my awareness of it): "I am therefore conscious of the identical self in regard to the manifold of the representations that are given to me in an intuition because I call them all together my representations, which constitute one" (*CPR* B158); and "[the principle of apperception] "says nothing more than that all my representations in any given intuition must stand under the condition under which alone I can ascribe [*rechnen*] them to the identical self as my representation" (*CPR* B138).
[29] Cf. *Treatise of Human Nature,* Book I, Part IV. With respect to the self-awareness that Kant calls 'inner sense,' he is in complete agreement with Hume (cf. *CPR* A107).

appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am" (*CPR* B157). Kant describes such existential self-awareness as an "indeterminate perception [which] here signifies only something real, which was given, and indeed only to thinking in general, thus not as appearance, and also not as a thing in itself (a noumenon), but rather as something that in fact exists and is indicated as an existing thing in the proposition 'I think'" (*CPR* B423). 'I' in this sense is very much a 'mere representation,' and one which is "wholly empty" (*CPR* A346/B404). It is in this respect that Kant writes, "Through this I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = x" (*CPR* A346/B404).[30]

Hegel regards this aspect of Kant's view of self-consciousness—as a kind of empty representation of a 'something = x'—as fundamentally inconsistent with the great insights in Kant's account of apperception. However, Hegel agrees with Kant that the self-awareness involved in consciousness in general (the 'I' of apperception) is, taken by itself, something *empty*. As Hegel puts it, "The 'I' [of consciousness] is still perfectly empty, a quite abstract subjectivity which posits the whole content of immediate mind outside of it and relates itself to it as to a world already in existence" (*EPS* ¶387Z). But, for Hegel, this emptiness is not a mere absence—a vacuous self-representation like a name or an indeterminate self-perception—but an inherent product of the kind of subject-object distinction that makes both apperceptive self-awareness and objective consciousness possible.

Hegel is taking up an essential feature of Kant's notion of the objective unity of apperception. For Kant, the identity of my consciousness in relation to its various and fluctuating contents requires that I not merely be severally (or serially) aware of these contents (now smoke, now fire, now red, now blue), but that I be *at once* synthetically conscious of the manifold together (by combining them *with one another* and being aware of that combination (cf. *CPR* B133)). For Kant, if I were merely severally aware of the manifold (and did not 'comprehend them in one consciousness') then "I would have as multicolored, diverse a self as I have representations of which I am conscious" (*CPR* B134). This distinction between a mere serial consciousness of the manifold and a synthetic consciousness of their connection corresponds to Kant's distinction between the merely 'subjective unity of apperception' and the 'objective unity of apperception' (*CPR* B139). For, in short, the latter amounts to synthetically grasping the connection among the various phenomena themselves (thus their objective unity) and not merely their connection *to me*. It is the difference between, on the one hand, now perceiving smoke, now perceiving fire and, on the other, being at once aware of the objective connection between the two (e.g. that the fire caused the smoke).[31]

Accordingly, for Kant, the unity of apperception coincides with the activity whereby what would otherwise be a flux of subjective mental contents is referred to an independent objective reality. That is, in combining these contents in accordance with a concept of their

[30] Strawson thus writes (with some justice): "What Kant intends to express by the "I think" of apperception is not simply that connectedness of experiences, ensured by means of concepts of the objective, which is the fundamental condition of the possibility of empirical self-consciousness. For him the "I think" of apperception represents also the tangential point of contact between the field of noumena and the world of appearances" (*Bounds of Sense*, 176).
[31] This is, of course, a quite condensed and simplified summary of Kant's account.

objective unity, they cease to be mere determinations *of* myself (mere affections or sensations) but become something *for me.* I recognize these same contents as sensibly given determinations of the object. To paraphrase Kant, *I* am not a multicolored, diverse self, but I am conscious *of* the multicolored diversity in the objects around me, from which I distinguish my own consciousness. In this way, the 'identical self' of apperception is essentially the unity of an *outward-looking* perspective in which all the *contents* of my consciousness are referred to something else, to the objects.[32]

For Hegel, this connection between apperceptive self-awareness and the inherent (if typically quite imperfect) objectivity of consciousness as such is the true ground of the emptiness of that self-awareness. Thus, in describing the 'I' of mere 'other-consciousness,' Hegel writes: "The object is only characterized as *its*; in other words, in the object it is only as an abstract I that the mind is reflected in itself: hence its existence there has still a content, which is not as its own" (*EPS* ¶416). That is, these contents (the redness of the flower, the shape of the rock) are 'mine' in a purely formal sense (they are included in my awareness), but they are not determinations of *me,* and I do not see myself reflected in these contents, but only in the bare fact that I am aware of them. So, for Hegel, as for Kant, mere apperception does not on its own amount to a contentful knowledge of what *I* am, for it is merely an awareness of my unified perspective *on something else*, the objects.

But for this reason, this emptiness is not a mere absence (as it appears to be when 'I' is taken as 'mere representation'), but rather, the achieved product of objective consciousness as such. Without that objectivity, my 'self' would by no means be empty, but it would—as Kant vividly puts it—be as diverse and multicolored as the representations of which I am aware. That is, of course, a hyperbolic image, but for Hegel there is a more serious sense in which the empty 'self' as subject-of-consciousness is a kind of self-unity which consists in a form of liberation from the flux of merely subjective experience. The relevant contrast for Hegel is not a kind of kaleidoscopic consciousness but, rather, what he calls the 'soul' or 'natural mind'—a mode of subjectivity which, with respect to the contents of its sensible experience, draws no distinction between subjective significance and objective truth, between the object *for it* and the object considered independently of its relation to it. Simply put, it is a relation to the world purely in the medium of *feeling*, in which the subjective and the objective, the inner and the outer, are, as it were, immediately one without any sharp distinction.

Here, we are not talking about an exclusively animal form of experience, much less a literal failure to distinguish myself, as an individual, from external things. At issue is simply the distinctive manner in which the world is experienced at the level of feeling. At this level, one's experience of a grey, dreary day, for instance, is not that of an objective meteorological event that causally produces a depressive psychological effect in me. Rather, these objective and subjective aspects are experienced in an undivided way and, indeed, as features of the world experienced—as when we simply say, 'It is a dreary day.'

[32] In Kant, this remains true, in an important sense, even if I attend to my own mind as object of inner sense: in making my mind my object, I still relate to it as though from without. (cf. *CPR* A362-6)

Of course, we all experience many things in this manner, but we are not—like animals and small children—*restricted* to this way of experiencing the world. Thus, Hegel describes the mode of awareness that *is* so restricted as "the soul which is entrapped, so to speak, in a childlike unity with the world" (*EPS* ¶413Z). It is a level of subjectivity which, precisely because it does not distinguish between the objective and the subjective, remains entirely immersed in and bound up with the ever-changing contents its outer experience. This is why Hegel describes the 'soul' in terms of a kind of experience whose contents are at once, and without sharp distinction, both presentations of an external world and qualitative determinations of the subject itself—like the dreary day. The soul is not an empty, unified perspective on objective reality; it is indeed as multicolored and diverse as the world it inhabits.

Now, Hegel does not regard consciousness, by contrast, as a purely cold, dispassionate attitude toward the world. But it is a mode of awareness defined by its awareness of the distinction between the objective and the subjective. In *consciousness*, the fluctuating sensuous contents of experience are not also fluctuating determinations *of myself* but are recognized simply as given determinations of the objective reality *of which* I am aware. Consciousness (and its corresponding apperceptive self-awareness) thus has the value of a kind of cognitive liberation from my 'entrapment in a childlike unity with the world.' As Hegel puts it:

> The immediate identity of the natural soul has been raised to this pure 'ideal' self-identity; and what the former *contained* is for this self-subsistent reflection set forth as an *object.* The pure abstract freedom of mind lets go from it its specific qualities—the soul's natural life—to an equal freedom as an independent object. It is of this latter, as external to it, that the I is in the first instance aware (conscious), and as such it is consciousness. (*EPS* ¶413)

This, however, is why Hegel regards it as 'barbarous' to view 'I' as an empty *representation*—a mere self-ignorance which lacks the content and objective reality of a manifold of sensuous determinations. About this Hegel writes: "Now if external intuition as determined in time and space is required for objectivity, and it is this objectivity that is missed, it is then clear that by objectivity is meant only sensuous reality. But to have risen above such a reality is precisely the condition of thinking and of truth" (*SL* 692/GW 12:195). The standpoint of consciousness, for Hegel, expressed by 'I,' is the result of distinguishing my subjectivity from the manifold of sense-determinations by referring them to an independent objective reality. Thus, in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel characterizes 'consciousness' in the following way: "In this form the free concept, as the "I" existing for itself, is withdrawn from objectivity, but it refers to the latter as its other, an object [*Gegenstand*] that confronts it" (*SL* 695/GW 12:198).

Nonetheless, Hegel, like Kant, is acutely aware that a mere unity of consciousness in relation to the fluctuating manifold of experience does not, on its own, constitute a substantial self-identity or self-knowledge. Much like Kant, Hegel writes that "the I is by itself only a formal identity" (*EPS* ¶415). It is a self-identity (and an awareness of it) which does indeed lack a

content and objectivity of its own. However, the appropriate understanding of the nature of that emptiness also determines what kind of content and objectivity could be *my own*—determinations of myself qua subject of consciousness.

For Hegel, what is lacking is not the kind of content and objectivity which mere sensible things possess—saltiness, color, etc. The problem of an empty coffer is not remedied by filling it with dirt. Rather, the kind of 'content' that belongs to the subject-of-consciousness as such (the 'I') is precisely its specific difference—or, better put, its specific self-distinguishing—from the "whole expanse of the sensible world." Its defining content is its independence or 'self-standingness' vis-à-vis the various contents and objects of immediate sense-experience. The subject gives itself content and objectivity—it determines itself—by objectively realizing that otherwise merely 'ideal' or *an sich* independence. That is why the central issue in the *Phenomenology*'s chapter on "Self-Consciousness" concerns the matter of objectively validating one's real independence through one's own action.

4.2 Desire-Satisfaction as a Form of Self-Objectification

We have seen that, for Hegel "Desire is the first and lowest level of self-consciousness" (*LPS* 186/GW 25.2: 783). It is by no means the paradigm of self-knowledge or human independence. Nonetheless, my aim has been to show that, by pressing the matter of why it is even the first level of self-consciousness (not, as it were, the 0^{th}), we are able to gain a better understanding of the broader concept it introduces. As we've seen, it is the concept of making myself, qua subject, into my own object. By this, Hegel does not mean mere second-order reflection, much less detached self-observation. Rather, he means a form of self-actualization—giving objective reality to my distinctive form of self-identity *as* a conscious subject—an 'I.' In this way, my objective identity—what I really am—is not simply an independent fact standing alongside my subjectivity but, rather, my subjectivity itself *as* a form of substantial being.

Hegel's claim is that immediate, destructive desire-satisfaction (for a subject of 'consciousness') exhibits this concept in its most basic form. To see how, we may begin by outlining schematically the different 'moments' of Hegel's concept of self-consciousness. The first is simply the aspect of *consciousness* itself. As we've seen, this aspect involves a kind of negative freedom which defines the conscious self, the 'I,' and distinguishes its perspective from that of the mere soul and its "childlike unity with the world." That freedom consists in a feature of apperception — namely, that I distinguish myself, *as* conscious subject, from the immediate contents of my experience. I remain one with myself in my relation to my outer objects by, as it were, extricating myself qua consciousness from the objective reality I perceive.

But on its own, that purely 'abstract freedom' of consciousness consists simply in attaining a perspective on reality as of an onlooker, regarding it from without (a mere 'subject of the world'). That is the emptiness of the 'I' of mere consciousness, and this 'abstract freedom' is one in which reality itself is, so to speak, the outer limit of my freedom. At issue in *self*-consciousness is the overcoming of this limitation. It is a matter of giving objective reality to the to the kind of oneness-with-self that defines the 'I' of consciousness—its self-integrity vis-à-vis

the contents and objects of its outer experience. The question is: how can that distinctive self-identity be realized *in the world*, rather than being limited to a mere perspective *on* the world?

To be clear, the "I" of Hegel's 'desire' is by no means portrayed as a highly objective, intellectual subject. It is not confronted with the question above in the manner of Faust in his dusty study, longing to break free from the barren prison of his own mind by going forth and embracing the spirit of the earth. On the contrary, the subject of Hegel's 'desire' stands, as it were, just on this side of the distinction between 'consciousness' and the soul. But, for all that, it is a 'consciousness' and is not to be understood as a mere brute or a child. Its attitude toward the outer object, the 'living thing,' is not that of childlike immersion but a kind of contempt, contrasted with its own 'self-certainty.'[33] For it, the significance of killing and eating is not merely that of fulfilling a natural need (though obviously that is involved) but also that of proving a kind of unconstrained dominance over its living objects.

In describing the self-consciousness of desire-satisfaction, Hegel writes: "self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this opposition [between subject and object] is overcome [*aufgehoben*], and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it" (*PhG* ¶167). In desire, the obvious aspect of overcoming this opposition is that I destroy the object and literally make it one with myself. This is an essential part of the desiring subject's affirmation of its rudimentary *Selbständigkeit* vis-à-vis its object: the object no longer stands against me and limits me but is made to conform to myself.

But for Hegel, the deeper significance concerns the overcoming of the opposition between subjectivity and objective reality itself. It is about giving the lie, so to speak, to the idea that the *being* of the 'I' is merely an insubstantial form of relating intentionally to the external world—a "one-sided subject without its objectivity" (*SL* 692/GW 12: 195). Thus, Hegel describes this desire-satisfaction as follows: "while the given object is rendered subjective, the subjectivity divests itself of its one-sidedness and becomes objective to itself" (*EPS* ¶427), and again, "The product of this process is the fast conjunction of the I with itself, its satisfaction realized, and itself made actual" (*EPS* ¶428).

Again, Hegel regards destructive desire-satisfaction as the lowest, most limited way that a conscious subject realizes its freedom in the world. Yet in these two aspects of 'self-identification' through my object, it provides the most basic illustration of a notion of self-consciousness that Hegel retains throughout his work. In his lectures on fine art, for example, he describes the way in which "man brings himself before himself" through his outer actions, as follows:

> [H]e has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject,

[33] Harris also emphasizes this point (*Hegel's Ladder*, 331).

> to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. (31; cf. GW 28.1: 229)

Now, as in desire, what we find here is an illustration of the defining feature of Hegel's concept of self-consciousness—namely, a purposive relation to one's object whose end is the actualization of the subject itself. In other words, it is a form of *self*-purposiveness achieved in and through one's objects. But this is precisely the structure of life itself. Hegel makes this point quite explicitly later in the *Phenomenology* when discussing the animal organism as "something that has its own self for its end" (¶257). "Therefore," he writes: "what it arrives at through the process of its action is itself; and in arriving only at itself, it obtains its feeling of self [*Selbstgefühl*]. We have here, it is true, the distinction between what it *is* and what it *seeks*, but this is merely the show of a distinction, and consequently it is in its own self a Concept. But this is precisely how *self-consciousness* is constituted" (¶¶257-8).

This brings us back to the topic with which we began: the relationship between self-consciousness and life. As I've argued at length, Hegel's account of immediate desire is not simply about the human being *qua* animal. It is about the most basic form of a distinctively human independence and the consciousness thereof. But the very proximity of this self-consciousness to mere animal nutritive life also highlights the nature and extent of the connection between the concept of self-consciousness thus introduced and the concept of life. Viewed in this way, Hegel begins his account in *PhG* IV with 'desire' not merely from an interest in examining natural life as the common denominator between animality and self-conscious subjectivity (which is not to say he is uninterested in this). Rather, he does so for the far subtler, albeit far more significant, reason that self-consciousness itself has the structure of life. I conclude with a few further remarks on this relation.

4.3 The Self as Living Substance

At the end of *Phenomenology*, chapter III ('Force and the Understanding'), the term 'self-consciousness' first appears as an illustration of the concept of 'Infinity.' The latter concept denotes a certain 'movement' of self-differentiation and self-unification that Hegel identifies with 'life' in a broad sense of the term: "This simple infinity, or the absolute Concept, may be called the simple essence of life" (¶162).[34] But this, Hegel claims, is the form of self-consciousness itself: "I distinguish myself from myself, and in so doing I am directly aware that what is distinguished from myself is not different" (*PhG* ¶164). As stated, this self-consciousness appears merely to be the abstract self-reflection that, in the beginning of the following chapter, Hegel will criticize as the "motionless tautology of 'I am I'" (¶167). But here is where desire is introduced as a form of self-identification that—by contrast to this empty, lifeless unity—is a contentful, self-relating *movemen*t. What distinguishes it from that 'motionless tautology' is that

[34] The emergence of this concept out of Hegel's account of the 'inverted world' and formalistic 'explanation' is, unfortunately, too complex to summarize here. Brownlee offers a useful account of this (*Recognition and the Self*, 48)

its self-identity embraces a *real* internal differentiation and the *Aufhebung* of that difference: "Hence otherness is for it in the form of *a being* [i.e. its external object], or as a *distinct moment*; but there is also for consciousness the unity of itself with this difference as a second moment" (¶167). Thus, to return to an earlier quotation, he writes, "self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this opposition is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it" (¶167).

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, this precisely how Hegel had described spirit as *living substance.* He writes: "the living substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or what is the same, is in truth actual only insofar as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself" (¶18). This (strikingly Fichtean) language is obscure, but what we have seen in our discussion of desire is the most basic example of such 'self-positing' (affirming, realizing *oneself*) through a kind of 'self-othering'—that is, making *oneself* one's object by opposing oneself to an external reality and overcoming this opposition. But this structure of 'living substance' is, for Hegel, by no means restricted merely to natural life. It likewise defines the form of substantial self-identity that Hegel calls "the I." Thus, in the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* ("Absolute Knowing"), he writes: "the 'I' is not merely the self, but the *identity of the self with itself;* but this identity is complete and immediate oneness with self, or this *subject* is just as much *substance*" (¶803). As we've seen, Hegel's account of desire presents the most basic way in the conscious subject's "identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it" (¶167).

Now, this may appear a rather strange way of thinking about either life or self-consciousness. Of course, the broad notion of an internally differentiated, self-unifying being has clear echoes of Kant's concept of an internal purposive being as a self-organizing, self-preserving whole (cf. *CPJ* §65). But in Hegel's account of desire—and, indeed, his conceptions of self-consciousness and the 'I' more broadly—this kind of unity-in-difference apparently has less to do with a merely internal unity than a kind of purposive unification with one's *objects*. Naturally, the relation between Hegel's and Kant's conceptions of *life* is a too extensive topic to treat in detail here, but the following brief remarks may help clarify the relation between self-consciousness and life in *PhG* IV.[35]

For Hegel, the individual animal is not a 'self-end' (*Selbstzweck*) merely in virtue of its internal organization (Hegel's 'Internal Process'), but essentially through the activity by which it preserves this unity *against* external nature while also sustaining it *through* external nature (in nutrition, the 'Life-Process'). In this way, its internal unity is an *end* that must by a certain opposition to what is outside of it and (in nutrition) an overcoming of that opposition. As we've seen in our earlier discussion of the topic, for Hegel, the individual animal's *Selbständigkeit* consists in this self-preserving activity. Again, 'desire' closely resembles this 'Life-Process,' but even apart from this specific form, we've seen that Hegel's general concept of self-consciousness resembles this structure. The 'I,' for Hegel, is a kind of self-identity that at once (a) preserves its

[35] For treatments of this topic, cf. Ng, *Hegel's Concept of Life*; Kreines, *Reason in the World*, and Kolodziej, *The Life of the Animal*

internal integrity (its self) *against* that which is 'other' to it, yet (b) gives objective reality to this identity only by actively engaging with that 'otherness' and incorporating it *into* its distinctive self-identity. In doing so, it realizes itself as its *end* and affirms its own *Selbständigkeit*. Importantly, as in Hegel's account of the 'Genus-Process' of life, he will likewise claim that this self-relation achieves a fuller, more enduring form when the 'object' is another self-standing subject like myself.

But, for Hegel, the self-identity that defines the 'I' as such is not simply identified with the individual organism. Its purely 'internal' unity is, in the first instance, a kind of negative freedom toward its objects that distinguishes its perspective from that of mere animal life and sensibility. As Hegel puts it, "Self-consciousness is, to begin with, simple being-for-self, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else" (*PhG* ¶186). This is the kind of inner independence that becomes an internal *end* that the subject attempts to *realize* in the world that confronts it. Put simply, it is a distinctive form of 'being-for-self'—not simply as life, but as *free life.* What we find in Hegel's accounts of desire, the struggle for recognition, and mastery and servitude, are what he regards as the most basic (and all quite limited) forms in which the conscious subject, the 'I,' is moved by a 'certainty' in this inner freedom and aims to give it substance and outer reality—to make its subjectivity objective.

Of course, destructive desire represents only the most minimal, deficient form of this self-consciousness, and the foregoing account only scratches the surface of Hegel's understanding of true consciousness of one's freedom. Nonetheless, by examining why it is a form of self-consciousness at all, I hope to have shed some light on a much broader idea that Hegel expresses early in the *Philosophy of Spirit*:

> The substance of mind is freedom, i.e. the absence of dependence on an other, the relating of self to self. Mind is the actualized Notion which is for itself and has itself for object. [...] But the freedom of mind or spirit is not merely an absence of dependence on another won outside of the other, but won in it; it attains actuality not by fleeing from the other but by overcoming it. (*EPS* ¶382Z)

5. Conclusion

Two points warrant particular emphasis in conclusion. First, as I've argued in this paper, Hegel's concept of self-consciousness should not be identified with a version of Kantian apperception but, rather, a particular form of self-knowledge. Nonetheless, it is wrong to view Hegel's 'self-consciousness' as denoting simply a different *topic* than Kant's concept of apperception. For an essential part of Hegel's criticism of Kant's conception of self-consciousness is that, for Hegel, such a conception introduces a disjointed concept of the *self*. Its consequence is that *I* as the 'identical self' of my consciousness, appear to be something entirely incommensurate with myself qua real being in the world. For Hegel, once we have an appropriate concept of the *self* itself (the 'I'), we can understand how even apperceptive self-

awareness, as an awareness of my 'ideal self-identity,' is itself an essential component or 'moment' of objective self-knowledge. Of course, for Hegel the task of overcoming this disjointed self is not merely a philosophical one but, for each of us, a practical one: to achieve my 'identity with myself' but giving substance and reality to my free subjectivity in the world.

Second, this reading of desire also opens a new and, I think, more productive avenue for understanding Hegel's subsequent account of the limitations of this 'first and lowest level of self-consciousness' and his transition to the issue of human social life. According to the reading I have defended, there is a far greater thematic continuity between Hegel's treatment of desire and his subsequent account of the need for a certain relation to "another self-consciousness" (¶175). Hegel's transition from desire to recognition is not suddenly making a great leap from the perspective of mere biological drive to that of human reason and self-consciousness. Rather, it concerns the subject's attempt to give a more substantial reality to its independence by realizing it not through the mere destruction and assimilation of its object, but through an 'object' that is self-standing in its own right ("another self-consciousness"). More precisely, it involves the idea that a truly substantial form of existing for oneself comes only in the shape of a "*Zusammenleben des Menschen"* (*EPS* ¶433), the shared life of human beings in which the freedom of each is both sustained and realized through their reciprocal action. But that is a further topic, which I've written about elsewhere.

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