

**I am He as You are He
as You are Me and We
are All Together: A
Critical Analysis and
Comparison of J.G.
Fichte and G.W.F.
Hegel's Theories of
Self-Consciousness**
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Introduction

Within German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a section which is perhaps one of the most important chapters of not only the *Phenomenology* but the whole of Hegel's corpus. That chapter is "Self-Consciousness." Though this discussion is only one fifth of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-Consciousness" is one of the most widely debated sections of the text. In it, Hegel gives an exhaustive, progressive examination from consciousness to self-consciousness, going through stages of desire, recognition, and the famous Lord and Bondsman dialectic.¹ "Self-Consciousness" is also the section of the text in which Hegel makes a thinly veiled criticism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte when he speaks of the simplistic "I am I" conception of self-consciousness. Hegel calls this view a "motionless tautology" and implies that Fichte's explanation of self-consciousness is somehow stunted and incomplete. In fact, Hegel begins his discussion of self-consciousness with this "motionless tautology of 'I am I'" theory of self-consciousness only to reject it and move on to a more complex understanding. But while Fichte and Hegel's theories of self-consciousness are vastly different, they are not as different as one may have originally thought, especially when Hegel is read in a specific way, such as John McDowell's heterodox reading of the text.

Fichte's Self-Consciousness

To begin the discussion of Hegel's critique of Fichte's theory of self-consciousness it is important to have a firm grasp of Fichte's theory on its own. Hegel describes Fichte's basic conception of self-conscious as "I am I" self-consciousness, a description which focuses on the self-sufficiency of the intellect in Fichte's theory. Fichte argues that the intellect—or the "I" as he deems it—is experienced solely through consciousness:

The published presentation of the first principles of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* commences with the proposition, "the I posits itself;" more specifically, "the I posits itself as an I." Since this activity of "self-positing" is taken to be the

¹Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness does not end with the Lord and Bondsman dialectic. In fact, Hegel goes on to explain three more movements self-consciousness must go through in order to be fully self-conscious: Stoicism, Skepticism, and Unhappy Consciousness. For the purpose of this paper, though, I will end my discussion with Lordship and Bondage.

fundamental feature of I-hood in general, the first principle asserts that “the I posits itself as self-positing.”²

Fichte believes that a person can become self-conscious by thinking about his or herself thinking about some object in the world, such as you thinking about yourself thinking about the things written on this page or me thinking about myself thinking about what I am writing.

This process, called abstraction³, is the focal point of Fichte’s self-consciousness argument: “... the ‘absolute I’ is a mere abstraction and that the only sort of I that can actually exist or act is a *finite, empirical, embodied, individual self*.”⁴ Fichte argues that self-consciousness is derived from abstracting from the objective world in order to come to the intellect. The intellect—the “I” for Fichte—is what is ontologically independent; whereas the object exists “in itself” but for another (the intellect), the intellect exists “for itself”: “[F]or Fichte, the subject just is—is nothing more or other than—its own spontaneous, substrateless activity of self-positing.”⁵ The intellect takes primacy over objects, which means that the intellect determines its properties for itself, independently from an “outside world.” Because one takes one’s consciousness to be one’s own, one is determining something about the intellect through the intellect itself. The intellect is thereby self-determining and self-sufficient: “[I]n Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*, the activity of ‘self-positing’ is the fundamental feature of the I-hood. In fact, Fichte takes the position...that the concept of self-consciousness contains the thought of a groundless subject spontaneously generating knowledge of its own existence.”⁶

However, as man lives in the objective world, one can never fully explain a singular self-consciousness without reference to physical objects or other self-consciousnesses in the world. The “I” may know itself from the beginning, but all of its experiences and perceptions are mediated through the objective world:

² Dan Breazeale, "Johann Gottlieb Fichte," In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022), ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/johann-fichte/>>.

³ J.G. Fichte, *Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale, (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), 11.

⁴ Breazeale.

⁵ Frederick Neuhauser, “Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth Westphal (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 40.

⁶ Marina Bykoa, “Kant’s ‘I Think’ and Fichte’s Principle of Self-Positing,” *Anuario Filosófico* 52, no. 1 (2019): 147, doi:10.15581/009.52.1.145-165

This same “identity in difference” of original self-consciousness might also be described as an “intellectual intuition,” in as much as it involves the *immediate* presence of the I to itself, prior to and independently of any sensory content. To be sure, such an “intellectual intuition” never occurs, as such, within empirical consciousness; instead, it must simply be presupposed (that is, “posited”) in order to explain the possibility of actual consciousness, within which subject and object are always already distinguished. The occurrence of such an original intellectual intuition is itself inferred, not intuited.⁷

Even though the “I” is self-positing and prior to sensible perceptions, because persons are finite, empirical, and embodied, the “I” will always be situated within the world at large.

Fichte’s theory of self-consciousness is also based largely on the claim that the intellect is an act, a kind of doing, and not a thing.⁸ Fichte calls the intellect a *Tathandlung* (fact/act) and *Gesetzein* (positing being). *Tathandlung* comes from the idea that the intellect is something one does *and* something one is: “In Fichte’s systematic philosophy, ‘the self-positing I’ expresses both the I’s act of positing itself and the fact that the I has been thus self-positing.”⁹ The intellect—the “I”—is not a thing. Rather, the “I” is the action of thinking about oneself thinking, the abstraction from objects to self-consciousness. Roughly translated, *Gesetzein* means “positing Being,” and it is another way of describing how the intellect is an action and not a thing. The intellect posits its own being rather than gaining being from some outside source. *Gesetzein* refers to Fichte’s inner eye idea of self-consciousness, or the idea that being comes from the intellect’s ability to grasp itself:

A fundamental corollary of Fichte’s understanding of I-hood (Ichheit) as a kind of *fact/act* is his denial that the I is originally any sort of “thing” or “substance.” Instead, the I is simply what it posits itself to be, and thus its “being” is, so to speak, a consequence of its self-positing, or rather, is co-terminus with the same.¹⁰

The intellect is also, as Fichte calls it, the immediate unity of Being and Seeing:

The intellect, as such *observes itself*, and this act of self-observation is immediately directed at everything that the intellect is. Indeed, the nature of the intellect consists precisely in this *immediate* unity of being and seeing. Everything included within the intellect exists *for* the intellect, and the intellect

⁷ Breazeale.

⁸ Fichte, 26.

⁹ Bykova, 160.

¹⁰ Breazeale.

is *for itself* everything that it is; only insofar as this is true is the intellect what is *qua* intellect.¹¹

For Fichte, the nature of the intellect lies in the immediate unity of what he calls “a double series within the intellect.”¹² What he means is that the intellect both experiences what is real—the objective world (seeing)—and what is ideal—itsself (being). These two objects of consciousness cannot be separated within the intellect. Rather, they will always be joined and experienced together and immediately. Furthermore:

Fichte claims that previous accounts of self-consciousness given by Descartes, Locke, and even Kant are “reflective,” regarding the self as taking itself not as subject but as object... But this reflective form of self-awareness, Fichte argues, presupposes a more primitive form since it is necessary for the reflecting self to be aware that the reflected self is in fact *itself*. Consequently, according to Fichte, we must possess an immediate acquaintance with ourselves, “the self exists and posits its own existence by virtue of merely existing.”¹³

Fichte’s theory of self-consciousness opposes “reflective self-consciousness” because he believes, like Hegel, that self-consciousness requires mutual recognition of two self-consciousnesses: “Self-consciousness, however, is not achieved simply through a single subject’s free activity, but requires two subjects freely engaging with each other through a reciprocal interaction.”¹⁴ This interaction Fichte calls a summons, and it encapsulates one self-consciousness’ expectations of the other self-consciousness. As man cannot exist without other men, all individuals must act in a way that supports others’ freedom and ability to become a self-positing “I.” Therefore,

There are two conditions on the I: 1) an *external condition* in which another subject initiates consciousness of one’s self-activity through the summons; and 2) an *internal condition* according to which the subject becomes aware of its determinability (its capacity to act in any number of ways) and transitions into self-consciousness by determining itself to act.¹⁵

Man’s social nature requires a level of reciprocity from at least one other self-conscious being to uncover its “reasons responsiveness capacity.”¹⁶ However, the “I” is still ultimately self-positing; this

¹¹ Fichte, 21.

¹² Fichte, 21.

¹³ Joel Smith, “Self-Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020). Ed. Edward N. Zalta. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/self-consciousness/>>.

¹⁴ Gabriel Gottlieb, “Fichte’s Developmental View of Self-Consciousness,” In *Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 117.

¹⁵ Gottlieb, 123.

¹⁶ Gottlieb, 125.

reciprocity between two self-consciousnesses is a condition of *practical* self-consciousness and not *pure* self-consciousness: “Fichte considers the pure I to possess a type of reality, even if that reality is distinct from the reality of objects experienced in space and time.”¹⁷ It is only a requirement when man is placed within a society, which is something Fichte argues must always be the case: “[T]he individual has to come to a vision of himself as integrated into a larger life shared with others, and that Spirit must somehow be fleshed out in this collective social order of which the individual is a part...”¹⁸

Furthermore, as Gunnar Beck points out:

Fichte’s views clearly echo those of Rousseau and Herder who, too, had recognized that man’s “humanization” and his “socialization” were interrelated processes and that all distinctively human faculties, i.e. thought, understanding, and moral judgment, while latent in every man, could be developed only in society.¹⁹

The reciprocity between two self-consciousnesses, Fichte argues, is what makes an “I” an individual and not just any self-positing being: “The attitudes, thoughts, and comportment of the two subjects constitute the very concept of individuality and the normative standing of a subject as an individual.”²⁰ But the fundamental nature of the “I” is as a self-positing, self-reverting, and self-reflecting *subject* and not the object of any other self-consciousness.

Hegel’s Self-Consciousness as Desire

The section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Self-Consciousness” has had a great and lasting impact on the world of philosophy. It is one of the most widely discussed parts of Hegel’s entire corpus²¹ and for good reason. In this section, Hegel lays out an extremely detailed progression from sense-certainty to self-consciousness, explaining all of the different “moments” one must go through in order to come to a complete understanding of self-consciousness. He starts this discussion with the transition from the previous section, “Consciousness,” to self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, Hegel maintains, is consciousness whose object is life. This is what is known as the

¹⁷ Gottlieb, 121.

¹⁸ Gunnar Beck, “From Kant to Hegel—Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Theory of Self-Consciousness,” *History of European Ideas* 22, no. 4 (1996): 285.

¹⁹ Beck, 280.

²⁰ Gottlieb, 126.

²¹ Axel Honneth, “From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s Account,” In *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*, ed. Dean Moyar and Michael Quant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 76.

first moment of self-consciousness. It is in this moment that Fichte's theory of self-consciousness fits. Hegel ultimately rejects this moment because it does not address the problem of otherness. This leads to the second moment, which can loosely be described as the unity of self-consciousness with itself, or self-consciousness as desire. Hegel also rejects this second moment, coming to the third moment of self-consciousness, his famous Lord and Bondsman dialectic.

Hegel rejects the first moment of self-consciousness—the idea that self-consciousness is simply a type of consciousness—when he criticizes Fichte's "motionless tautology of 'I am I.'" As explained earlier, Hegel finds this conception too subjective; he believes that the "I" is both in-*and*-for-itself. Hegel's second step in the chain of self-consciousness seeks to remedy this problem by progressing to the unity of self-consciousness with itself.²² This moment, known as "Self-Consciousness as Desire," explains self-consciousness as a form of desire. Hegel argues that the object of self-consciousness cannot be only itself because self-consciousness must have a connection to the objective world. Without objects to be conscious of, there would be no self-consciousness. After all, even Fichte's "overly simplistic" formalist self-consciousness emerges only after abstracting from the objective world. But self-consciousness must be related to the objective world in a special way. Hegel finds this connection by explaining self-consciousness as desire, especially the desire for unity.²³

Hegel's desire model strives to solve the problem of a subjective self-consciousness' interactions with an objective world. Self-consciousness seeks to be an autonomous force—it desires complete unity and self-sufficiency. It must therefore destroy everything that is not itself.²⁴ The desire for unity springs from the need of self-consciousness to consume what is not it because it sees itself as primary and solitary.²⁵ Put more succinctly, self-consciousness is what is left after abstracting from the objective world; thus it only knows itself insofar as it knows objects. This stage of Hegel's self-consciousness is very similar to Fichte's self-consciousness. However, Hegel's self-consciousness

²² Hegel ¶167, 104-5.

²³ Scott Jenkins, "Hegel's Concept of Desire," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2009): 106, URL = [https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/16894/JenkinsS_JHP_47\(1\)103.pdf?sequence=1](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/16894/JenkinsS_JHP_47(1)103.pdf?sequence=1)

²⁴ Neuhauser, 43.

²⁵ Neuhauser, 38.

wants to be a simple whole, so it seeks to destroy or consume the objective world instead of just abstracting from it.²⁶ This desire model also explains how Hegel conceives of self-consciousness as practical as opposed to theoretical; desire is the basic drive to be autonomous and self-sufficient.²⁷ At this stage, self-consciousness is not merely conceptual—the theoretical “I” thinking about itself thinking—but is a real desire. This desire characterizes the fundamental nature and defining aim of the self-conscious subject: the need to be autonomous.²⁸ Hence the practical nature of desire. The object of self-consciousness at the stage of desire is twofold:

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. In this sphere, self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it.²⁹

Self-consciousness’ object has—at the same time—qualities of its negative and of itself.³⁰ Because self-consciousness controls the nature of the thing it desires by desiring it, its object is in some ways itself. Self-consciousness’ object must also be its negative because it constitutes everything that self-consciousness is not.³¹ This is precisely why self-consciousness desires to consume its object. As self-consciousness is thought of as entirely subjective, its negative must be entirely objective. Therefore, the second object of self-consciousness is life, or the totality of the objective world. According to Hegel, life—as an organic totality—is necessarily a living thing, which means that the object of self-consciousness is a living thing—life.

It is important here to take a moment to explain how Hegel conceives of life, as it plays a large role in how self-consciousness understands itself.³² According to Hegel, life is not only the totality of things in the objective world but is also itself a living thing. Life is simple infinity, comprised not of

²⁶ Neuhouser, 42.

²⁷ Neuhouser, 38.

²⁸ Neuhouser, 39.

²⁹ Hegel ¶ 167, 105.

³⁰ Paul Redding, “The Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: The Dialectic of Lord and Bondsman in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to Hegel and Nineteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. F. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.

³¹ Hegel ¶ 168, 106.

³² Honneth, 79.

just relata or relations but of the infinite cycle between the two. Life is also movement—the constant movement from individual things to the totality of concepts and back again.³³ The long discussion on life in the *Phenomenology* is significant because self-consciousness is trying to understand itself as the opposite—and therefore superior—of life. Because self-consciousness is different from and superior to its object, it can therefore consume it without problem.³⁴ Furthermore, there exists a unity in life different from the immediate unity self-consciousness first took as its being. This new unity is what Hegel calls universal unity or simple genus, and it is in this unity that life exists for self-consciousness:

It is the *simple genus*, which in the movement of life itself does not *exist for itself as this “simple.”* Rather, in this *result*, life points towards something other than itself, namely, towards consciousness, for which life exists as this unity, that is, as genus.³⁵

Self-consciousness’ realization that life is a living thing marks a turning point in desire. It begins to see the world as being developed by and dependent on its own cognition. Self-consciousness no longer sees itself as existing in a senseless, placeless vacuum but as relating to a living, organic reality.³⁶

A problem arises here, though, because self-consciousness seeks to consume the very object that it depends on for sovereignty.³⁷ The self-conscious subjects tries to prove its independence and self-sufficiency by completely negating and sublating its object, but without an object, there is nothing of which self-consciousness can be conscious.³⁸ This is an observation Fichte also notes: “To be conscious of oneself, therefore, always and necessarily implies simultaneous awareness of something else. ‘No subject, no object; no object, no subject.’”³⁹ Another problem of the desire model comes from the fact that self-consciousness does not yet realize that it is itself part of that organic whole that is life.⁴⁰ Because life is the totality of both relata and relations, self-consciousness is a part of life and thereby part of its own object. This means that self-consciousness is ultimately trying to destroy itself, which simply cannot be done. No matter how much self-consciousness “consumes” life, life will still

³³ Hegel ¶ 169, 106-7.

³⁴ Neuhausser, 41-2.

³⁵ Hegel ¶ 172, 108.

³⁶ Honneth, 80.

³⁷ Neuhausser, 43.

³⁸ Hegel ¶ 175, 109-10.

³⁹ Beck, 277.

⁴⁰ Honneth, 84.

exist.⁴¹ The object of self-consciousness cannot solely be life because self-consciousness is a part of life, whether it realizes this or not. Therefore, it must also be something different than itself. In order for self-consciousness to maintain its self-sufficiency its object must be lower than itself so that self-consciousness can negate it.⁴² Equally, self-consciousness' object must also be capable of long-lasting satisfaction of desire's need to consume; it must not disappear once negated. This leads to the conclusion that the object of desire—the object of self-consciousness—must necessarily be another self-sufficient self-consciousness: “*Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*”⁴³ This prompts Hegel to turn to the third moment: “Self-consciousness as Recognition.”

Hegel's Self-Consciousness as Recognition

The object of self-consciousness must be another self-consciousness because only another self-consciousness—another subject or “I”—can negate itself and in doing so become *for* another.⁴⁴ Subsequently, only a self-sufficient “I” can exist once negated; because it negates itself, it remains self-determining and can therefore still exist.⁴⁵ This concept of recognition solves the problem of how self-consciousness can exist both in-and-for-itself. It exists in-itself insofar as it exists for another consciousness to be conscious of, and for-itself because it is autonomous and self-determining even after it negates itself. The first self-consciousness recognizes this other self-consciousness as more than a mere object and so must seek recognition from this new object: “*A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only thereby does self-consciousness in fact exist, for it is only therein that the unity of itself in its otherness comes to be for it.*”⁴⁶ The process of recognition is not an immediate one, though. There are several stages within this moment.

When the self-conscious subject is confronted with another self-consciousness, a strange thing happens. The first subject sees the second as an object, as the second subject is something other than

⁴¹ Honneth, 85.

⁴² Neuhauser, 45.

⁴³ Hegel ¶ 175, 109.

⁴⁴ Hegel ¶ 177, 110.

⁴⁵ Neuhauser, 45.

⁴⁶ Hegel ¶ 177, 110.

the first subject's self. Yet the first subject also sees itself in the second self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, therefore, seeks to sublimate the other in order to be sure of its own self-sufficiency. Self-consciousness thus seeks to sublimate itself, as the other *is* itself.⁴⁷ Moreover, the same process is happening in the other self-consciousness; it is a two-sided phenomenon which Hegel calls doubling.⁴⁸ It is at this moment of doubling that the self-conscious subject begins to realize that it is not its own genus but is, in fact, related to other things, related to life.⁴⁹ It realizes that it is not absolutely or completely self-sufficient. This initial confrontation is the beginning of the self-conscious subject's awareness of itself in the grand scheme of things, though it fights to the death to preserve its original conception of itself as autonomous. Once each self-consciousness realizes that it is being used as an object by the other, "They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing each other*."⁵⁰ More importantly, each subject begins to see the other subject as like itself, as self-conscious.⁵¹ This process of mutual recognition is very similar to Fichte's theory of practical self-consciousness as determined by the mutual recognition of one self-consciousness by another. But as Fichte's self-consciousnesses do not seek to completely sublimate and consume one another, his view of mutual recognition is slightly but importantly different. Furthermore, when two self-consciousnesses, in Fichte's theory, mutually recognize each other they each *both* become at the same time an object-in-itself and an object-for-itself, unlike Hegel's conclusion of this moment of self-consciousness.

In paragraph 184 of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he continues to explain how the process of mutual recognition initially works through the use of middle and extreme terms. Each subject is, at the same time, the *merely recognized* term and the *merely recognizing* term (the extremes) as well as the middle term. Each self-consciousness begins the process as merely recognizing, taking the other as an object. But because the object of this self-consciousness is in fact another self-consciousness, the first self-consciousness realizes that it is also being used by the other, so it adjusts its view of itself as

⁴⁷ Hegel ¶ 180, 111.

⁴⁸ Hegel ¶ 182, 111-12.

⁴⁹ Honneth, 80.

⁵⁰ Hegel ¶ 184, 112.

⁵¹ Victoria Burke, "Hegel's Concept of Mutual Recognition: The Limits of Self-Determination," *The Philosophical Forum* 36, no. 2 (2005): 215, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9191.2005.00201.x

merely recognized. Both subjects go through this process, though, so each self-consciousness is a middle term because it is used by the other self-consciousness as an object.⁵² This is what is referred to as “mutual recognition.” What is significant about mutual recognition is that the subject becomes aware of itself as a consciousness through the awareness of another consciousness. This leads each subject to the realization that it is self-conscious and not merely conscious,⁵³ which progresses to Hegel’s further explanation of recognition in his Lord and Bondsman dialectic.

Hegel’s Lord and Bondsman Dialectic

To completely understand the Lord and Bondsman dialectic, one must first understand the aside Hegel makes in paragraph 187 of the *Phenomenology* concerning the fight to the death between the two self-consciousnesses of recognition: “Thus the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle.”⁵⁴ To prove their worth both to themselves and to each other, the two self-consciousnesses must engage in a fight to the death.⁵⁵ Hegel argues that neither of the self-consciousnesses will easily concede its sovereignty to the other. Instead, each of these two self-consciousnesses will “fight to the death” to negate the other and maintain its own self-sufficient status. Hegel calls the search for recognition a matter of life and death because to continue to be the self-sufficient subject self-consciousness wants to be, it must negate and consume the other, effectively killing it. Further, each self-conscious subject is risking its sovereignty in asking for a second self-consciousness to recognize it. This is where the Lord and Bondsman dialectic adds to Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness. Hegel claims that eventually, fearing complete negation—death—one of the self-conscious subjects will negate itself and become the Bondsman to the other subject’s role of Lord.⁵⁶ This is different from Fichte’s use of mutual recognition in his theory of self-consciousness because in his explanation, the two self-conscious subjects co-exist as both subject and object; neither self-consciousness “kills” the other. In Hegel’s mutual recognition, the

⁵² Hegel ¶ 184, 112.

⁵³ Burke, 215.

⁵⁴ Hegel ¶ 187, 113-14.

⁵⁵ Hegel ¶ 187, 113-14.

⁵⁶ Hegel ¶ 189, 115.

Bondsman is the self-consciousness that negates itself and is used as an object—being *in-itself*—and the Lord is the self-consciousness that maintains its sovereignty and self-sufficient identity—being *for-itself*.⁵⁷ Hegel never fully explains what exactly makes one subject choose to become a Bondsman as opposed to a Lord, only that the Bondsman-subject is the subject most afraid of death and so eventually capitulates, and that act of self-negation is a choice, allowing the Bondsman self-consciousness to stay self-determining.

The Lord and Bondsman relationship works thusly: the Lord gains recognition of itself through the Bondsman's recognition of it, but the Lord does not recognize the Bondsman as a *subject*. The Lord does, however, recognize the Bondsman as an *object* and mediates himself through this otherness. Therefore, the Lord remains a subject while the Bondsman becomes an object through the act of self-negation, which it commits to save its life.⁵⁸ The Lord uses the Bondsman to satisfy his desire of dominating his object while the Bondsman submits to the Lord as something higher than himself. The Bondsman follows the orders of the Lord, which allows the Lord to remain sovereign and autonomous. It is important to remember that the Lord is still connected to the Bondsman:

Rather, it [the Lord] is consciousness existing for itself which is mediated with itself through an *other* consciousness, namely, through an other whose essence includes its being synthetically combined with self-sufficient *being*, that is, with thinghood itself.⁵⁹

It is through the Bondsman that the Lord connects to life as well. The Lord does not deal directly with the objective world. Instead, he forces the Bondsman to work within the world for him.⁶⁰

It would seem, then, that the “winner” in this dialectic—the true self-consciousness—is found in the Lord or Master. This is not the case. It is actually the Bondsman that represents the fullest model of self-consciousness.⁶¹ Hegel explains this by appealing to a variety of reasons. First, the Bondsman has some idea of what freedom is while the Lord does not.⁶² Because it sees the Lord as trying to freely relate to objects, the Bondsman has more of a conception of freedom than the Lord himself. Second,

⁵⁷ Redding, 12-3.

⁵⁸ Redding, 13.

⁵⁹ Hegel ¶ 190, 115-16.

⁶⁰ Hegel ¶ 190, 115-16.

⁶¹ Hegel ¶ 193, 117.

⁶² Hegel ¶ 194, 117.

the Bondsman is the self-consciousness that actually has contact with the objective world. In order to be tied to the objective world in the fullest sense, one must live in the world; one must have a picture of oneself in the world doing things. The Lord does not have this picture. Furthermore, the Lord does not progress past the faulty desire model. Because the Lord does not recognize the Bondsman as a self-sufficient self-consciousness, he continues to act as if he is the only sovereign self-conscious subject there is.⁶³ The Bondsman, on the other hand, through working in the objective world, has a fuller conception of life than the Lord. Also, the Bondsman is ultimately more self-sufficient and sovereign than the Lord because the Bondsman negates himself instead of being negated by an outside force, remaining self-determining.⁶⁴

Additionally the Bondsman is ultimately more self-sufficient and sovereign than the Lord because the Bondsman works, and work leads to individuality.⁶⁵ This is because, in working, the Bondsman has a specific function within a more complex structure. In becoming “desire held in check” as Hegel calls it,⁶⁶ the Bondsman has learned to master both the objective world and himself.⁶⁷ In serving the Lord, the Bondsman learns to control his own desires and act on behalf of something higher, leading the Bondsman to become Master or Lord over himself.⁶⁸ It is in this way that the Bondsman is the fullest self-conscious subject. Lastly, because the Bondsman has experienced the fear of death—the fear of complete negation—he can grasp the concept of absolute separation from the objective world, something the Lord cannot do. Through his fear of death and ability to keep his natural desires in check, the Bondsman becomes master over both himself and the world, making him the true self-consciousness.

McDowell’s Heterodox Reading of Hegel’s “Self-Consciousness”

It is extremely important to note here that there is a very big difference between Hegel and Fichte’s theories of self-consciousness. Fichte’s “pure I,” or simple self-consciousness, is a fully

⁶³ Redding, 13-14.

⁶⁴ Burke, 220.

⁶⁵ Hegel ¶ 195, 118.

⁶⁶ Hegel ¶ 195, 118.

⁶⁷ Burke, 220.

⁶⁸ Neuhauser, 51.

independent, self-determining subject. Hegel's self-consciousness, on the other hand, can only become fully self-conscious and fully sovereign through some other self-consciousness. Yet Hegel and Fichte's views become more similar when Hegel's "Self-Consciousness" is read in a specific way. Most Hegelian scholars take the view that the "other" Hegel refers to—the second self-consciousness in the moment of mutual recognition—is literally another person. John McDowell disagrees. In his article "The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox reading of 'Lordship and Bondage' in Hegel's *Phenomenology*," McDowell argues that the "other" that self-consciousness confronts is otherness inside itself. McDowell begins his criticism of the conventional reading of "Self-Consciousness" by raising the question of how the relationship of Lord to Bondsman is related to self-consciousness' original goal of sublating the otherness between the subjective and objective.⁶⁹

In his article, McDowell reinterprets the chapter "Self-Consciousness," following as closely to the original text as he can. He explains the first two moments of self-consciousness and finds no problems with the customary reading of them. It is when McDowell comes to the third moment of self-consciousness—that of mutual recognition—that his interpretation differs. Ordinarily, the other self-consciousness Hegel refers to is taken to mean another individual, or a second self-conscious being. McDowell rejects this. The problem he has with this reading of the text lies mainly in the question he asked at the beginning of his critique. According to McDowell, the otherness that must be sublated by the self-conscious subject must be the totality of the objective world.⁷⁰ The "another self-consciousness" that Hegel refers to must be the first of the doubled object of self-consciousness in the desire stage—life. As the object of self-consciousness, McDowell argues, life returns to itself and is then revealed to be consciousness, which is necessarily self-consciousness.⁷¹ The "other" self-consciousness is merely the part of consciousness that is still in the movement of overcoming the

⁶⁹ John McDowell, "The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of 'Lordship and Bondage,'" In *Hegel's Phenomenology*, *The Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 47-8 (2003):5.

⁷⁰ McDowell, 8.

⁷¹ McDowell, 8.

difference between the two moments: “So ‘another’, in ‘another self-consciousness,’ reflects how things seem to consciousness at the stage of its education, not how things actually are.”⁷²

This may at first seem counter-intuitive, but McDowell further explains why he believes the text to read this way. The otherness presented to self-consciousness is not another self-conscious person but the otherness that is that first subject’s life.⁷³ There exists a disconnect between self-consciousness as a subject and the empirical life that that subject leads because self-consciousness wants to see itself as entirely independent from the objective world. It is this life lead in the empirical world, McDowell claims, that becomes revealed as the other “self-consciousness” that the primary self-consciousness must confront. The struggle to the death that Hegel describes in the beginning of the treatise on Lordship and Bondage is not a struggle between two living beings but instead an allegorical struggle of a single self-consciousness to prove its independence from the otherness of the objective world and its own life.⁷⁴ One subject is attempting to rid itself of any connection to the life it lives in the objective world, which has become the otherness that it does not yet recognize is in fact itself.⁷⁵ This is a struggle of life and death for both “subjects” in that self-consciousness is trying to disconnect itself from life, but that life is in fact its own. Killing that life would therefore also kill the self-conscious subject.⁷⁶ As for how McDowell’s conception of self-consciousness fits with the Lord and Bondsman dialectic, he finds no problem. This dialectic is simply a continuation of the allegory used in the fight to the death; the enslaving of another individual who negates itself for fear of death is symbolic of self-consciousness realizing the indispensability of, yet refusal to identify with, a life lived in the empirical world.⁷⁷ Ultimately, both the Lord and Bondsman are part of the same self-consciousness, but it does not yet realize that they both are actually one and the same.

⁷² McDowell, 9.

⁷³ McDowell, 9.

⁷⁴ McDowell, 10.

⁷⁵ McDowell 10.

⁷⁶ McDowell, 10.

⁷⁷ McDowell, 11.

Conclusion

Hegel ends his discussion of the Lord and Bondsman dialectic with the concession that it is the Bondsman in the Lord and Bondsman dialectic of recognition that has the fullest conception of self-consciousness. He makes this claim after going through, in prolific detail, the moments of desire and recognition as well as the life and death struggle between the Lord and Bondsman. Hegel explains that the Bondsman is the true sovereign self-consciousness because he affects negation in himself, keeping his desires in check, and becoming master of himself. In many ways this is not all that different from the Fichtean conception of self-consciousness. Hegel says that the Bondsman is ultimately sovereign because he determines his own negation, effectively remaining self-determining. Fichte himself makes a similar claim in the introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, that the intellect is self-determining.

Fichte's functionalist self-consciousness is, as Hegel argues, too simplistic and underdeveloped. It does not account for the objective world; it claims to abstract the intellect from the object, which amounts to bad Idealism. Hegel's doctrine of mutual recognition is also faulty. The idea that one cannot become fully self-conscious until recognized by another self-consciousness seems a bit excessive. I am skeptical of the ability of any person to fully recognize another being as self-conscious, at least on a level such as Hegel suggests. That is why I find John McDowell's heterodox reading of Hegel the best explanation of self-consciousness explored in this paper. McDowell's argument that the mutual recognition of Hegel's self-consciousness is not that of two independent beings but of an otherness inside one subject solves the problems I have with both Fichte and Hegel. McDowell's theory accounts for the objectivity that is missing from Fichte's "I = I" self-consciousness while removing the reliance on a second being that caused hesitation towards Hegel's concept of self-consciousness. McDowell presents a happy medium between Fichte and Hegel, and I find it to be the most convincing of the arguments that I have come across.

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