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THE TRANSFORMATION OF 'SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS' IN HEGEL'S
PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract

My dissertation aims to provide a systematic interpretation of one section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'Self-Consciousness.' I argue that by taking what I call the transformative view of Hegel's methodology, the practical and seemingly disparate topics in 'Self-Consciousness' can be understood as a continuous line of thought leading to an innovative understanding of knowing as a self-aware practice. The central motivation for my interpretation is that while Hegel explicitly claims that the *Phenomenology* is a work of epistemology—"an investigation and testing of the reality of cognition,"—"Self-Consciousness' appears to, on the face of it, depart from this ambition. The section quickly plunges into a number of surprising claims—that self-consciousness is "desire *überhaupt*," that its "object has become life"—which are followed by a discussion of recognition exemplified in a relation between master and slave, giving rise to the notion of conceptual thought. My dissertation reconciles these seemingly conflicting aspects of the text. Chapter 1 focuses on what exactly Hegel means by an "investigation" of cognition and there I present my transformative reading of Hegel's phenomenological method. I argue that Hegel sees his project as a distinctively developmental epistemological progression in which the conception of knowledge at each stage transforms in light of an instructive failure. Chapter 2 applies the insights of the transformative view to the initial transition of 'Self-Consciousness,' dubbed the "practical turn" of the *Phenomenology* for its quick advance into a number of practical topics. I argue that these practical topics emerge from a continuation of epistemological concerns and do not constitute a change in topic. Hegel thinks we must understand knowledge in terms of an active, self-referring structure of unity between subject and object that he calls "infinity" and is exemplified in the dynamic of desire and life. Chapter 3 concerns the transition towards

recognition and again applies the insights of the transformative view. I argue that recognition allows for consciousness to be its own object in the sense of giving manifestation to subjectivity in social relations. In addition, such social relations build upon and transform the conception of a unity of subject and object in the form of a living being. In chapter 4 I consider the social relation between master and servant and the turn to stoicism. I argue that this social relation gives rise to a self-aware mode of being that is centered around a sense of absolute authority exhibited in the role of the master, which Hegel calls “conceptual thought.” Viewing these transitions as exhibiting developmental transformations in our conception of knowledge, the result is that we come to see a notion of conceptual thought that is informed by all of the previous steps in this progression. We arrive at the idea that knowing is a self-aware practice, a socially and practically embedded form of life centered around universal ideals.

Introduction

My dissertation aims to provide a systematic interpretation of one section of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'Self-Consciousness.' There are two main sources of motivation for advancing such a project. The first is that the selection itself seemingly parts ways with Hegel's explicit aim for project of the *Phenomenology* as a whole, namely, to examine knowledge. Although this stretch of text is notoriously difficult, it has been a great source of influence in the history of philosophy. Elements can be found, not only in Hegel scholarship, but in the traditions of Marxism, Critical Theory, Existentialism and many other notable thinkers. This is in part due to the number of topics that are traversed in this relatively short portion of text. Hegel's discussion ranges from life, desire, recognition, mastery and servitude to stoicism, skepticism and Catholicism. But while 'Self-Consciousness' has been influential in the many areas of philosophy that cross paths with the aforementioned topics, the content of this stretch of text raises an immediate interpretive puzzle. The somewhat meandering focal point of 'Self-Consciousness' seems to be centered around issues that are practical in nature, but Hegel explicitly refers to the project of the *Phenomenology* as an epistemological project, i.e. "an *investigation and testing of the reality of cognition.*"¹ Moreover, 'Self-Consciousness' appears quite early in this proclaimed epistemological investigation and immediately follows 'Consciousness,' the first chapter of the text which deals with more straightforwardly epistemological topics like empiricism, perception and scientific realism. So the puzzle that

¹ P. 54, par. 81. All quotes are taken from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, T. Pinkard trans., Cambridge University Press (2018), unless otherwise specified. Quotes are identified according to paragraph number, which, although it is not entirely consistent, mostly corresponds to the paragraph numbering of the well-known A. V. Miller translation, Oxford University Press (1977).

presents itself is how ‘Self-Consciousness’ and its seemingly practical topics fit into a work of epistemology.

The second source of motivation for my project is that a focus on this interpretive puzzle and the epistemological significance of ‘Self-Consciousness’ has been somewhat neglected in the literature. Many of the most influential and systematic readings of this stretch of text have focused on illuminating Hegel’s practical, social and political philosophy, and shied away from discussing Hegel’s epistemological ambitions that are supposedly driving his discussion. On the other hand, projects focused on the *Phenomenology* as a work of epistemology have been largely focused on the broader themes of the text as a whole, such as Hegel’s phenomenological method, and are less concerned with the specific transitions to the many practical topics discussed. This is not to deny that many interesting things have been said about ‘Self-Consciousness;’ nor is it to deny that many scholars with systematic readings of Hegel have contributed to the discussion of ‘Self-Consciousness.’ But many of the discussions of this portion of text play somewhat of an auxiliary role in projects that are primarily concerned with other aspects of Hegel’s views.² Such projects have proven, I think, quite important to understanding Hegel’s corpus. However, as significant and well known as ‘Self-Consciousness’ is, there is good reason to think that our understanding of the *Phenomenology* would be well-served by a study taking ‘Self-Consciousness’ as its focal point.

² Looking to the projects of many notable Hegel scholars, the auxiliary role of ‘Self-Consciousness’ is quite obvious. Both Axel Honneth and Fred Neuhouser focus on social and political views, while both treat ‘Self-Consciousness’ in articles that are somewhat separate from their main interpretive projects. And while Honneth does provide an in depth treatment of recognition in his “The Struggle for Recognition,” (1995) a central topic of ‘Self-Consciousness,’ he draws from Hegel’s work before the *Phenomenology*. Kenneth Westphal and Michael Forster give ‘Self-Consciousness’ rather brief treatment as they are mostly concerned with the *Phenomenology* as a whole. Similarly Alexander Kojève (1980), Jean Hyppolite (1979) and Robert Brandom (2019), who are perhaps more concerned with this chapter, have projects focused on giving a reading of the entire text. One exception is Robert Pippin’s “Hegel on Self-Consciousness.” (2011)

Armed with only a few general facts about the text and its reception in the literature, we can see that the aforementioned puzzle raises a number of important questions that need answering. First is the question of what Hegel means by conducting an epistemological investigation. The keystone of the *Phenomenology* is Hegel's phenomenological method, which he presents in the introduction to the text. This method is known to be something distinctively Hegelian and, thus, any chance of being able to understand how Hegel's epistemological project ventures into the topics mentioned above would seem to require a somewhat substantive interpretation of his unique approach. Moreover, an interpretation of any part of the *Phenomenology* would be greatly disadvantaged (to say the least) without, not only providing an understanding of Hegel's quite unique method itself, but also showing how the text employs this method. Hegel describes his text as proceeding by moving from one "shape of consciousness" to another and the phenomenological method is the means by which these transitions occur. So the second question that arises is how the salient transitions (towards and within 'Self-Consciousness') exemplify Hegel's phenomenological method. Put differently, we should be able to see how the transitions to these practical topics are somehow epistemologically motivated on a specific interpretation of what Hegel's epistemological investigation amounts to. Finally, this leads to the question of how 'Self-Consciousness' fits into the *Phenomenology* as a whole. That is, with giving an account of how each transition is epistemologically motivated within 'Self-Consciousness' a story about how this chapter works toward Hegel's overall aim in the text ought to be revealed. It is evident that Hegel thinks of the *Phenomenology* as a progression towards absolute knowledge, the standpoint of science. Even if one leaves certain questions unanswered—as the *Phenomenology* is a sprawling and complicated text—a good interpretation

ought to supply some narrative as to why the contents of ‘Self-Consciousness’ play a role in bringing us closer to absolute knowledge.

These questions provide us with three desiderata for an adequate interpretation of ‘Self-Consciousness’ and they can be stated more succinctly in the following way:

1. An adequate interpretation ought to provide an understanding of what Hegel means by an examination of knowledge (his phenomenological method).
2. It should reveal the main transitions from one shape of consciousness to the next as exemplifying this method, presenting the emergence of each topic as epistemologically motivated.
3. It should explain how ‘Self-Consciousness’ as a whole provides some *progress* towards absolute knowledge.

Concern for these desiderata has not typically been the primary focus of commentators. It is common to find in the literature serious studies of Hegel’s phenomenological method and how he intends to proceed towards absolute knowledge, on the one hand, and, on the other, serious studies of specific portions of the text itself. It is rare, however, to see these types of project combined in a single work. I take my project to be novel in that it aims to do precisely this. My dissertation answers to the above desiderata and in doing so provides a reading of ‘Self-Consciousness’ that is informed and guided by an understanding of Hegel’s unique methodology and overall aim of the *Phenomenology*.

I argue that Hegel’s project ought to be understood as a work of what I will call transformative critique. On this transformative view, Hegel’s methodology allows for shifts and alterations in our conception of knowledge. Moreover, these transformations are developmental in nature, wherein each stage of development, i.e. each shape of consciousness, builds upon the

previous one. As Hegel outlines it in the introduction, each shape of consciousness experiences a failure to meet its own standard of knowledge and this is what provides the impetus for the alteration of that conception of knowledge, giving rise to a new shape of consciousness. Guided by this transformative view of Hegel's methodology, I turn to the major transitions of 'Self-Consciousness.' Given the outline of this developmental method, we are directed to pay particularly close attention to the failures that prompt these transitions and the context in which they arise. The first major transition that gives rise to the initial form of Self-Consciousness, I argue, reveals a shift in how to understand the main organizing principles of reality: from natural laws to the self-determination of living things. This not only places life as central to our grasp of reality and nature, but it also places the subject of knowledge within nature as itself a living being. The turn to recognition, however, is prompted by the insight that the subject of knowledge cannot be understood as merely a living thing and instead the cognitive subject is one that is self-aware and distinguishes itself from nature via a social existence. But in the ensuing relationship of master and servant, I argue, we see this social relation give rise to a kind of absolute authority, perceived as such by the servant. Bringing these elements together, in stoicism there emerges a conceptual, thinking way of life--an understanding of the epistemic subject that is (to some degree) immersed in a social and natural existence centered around a universal sense of truth and right. On my reading, then, the seemingly meandering string of practical topics covered in 'Self-Consciousness' reveal a path towards a unique and innovative understanding of knowledge as a practice and way of being in the world.

Chapter 1 sets out to meet the first desideratum above and it presents my reading of Hegel's phenomenological method that I call the transformative view, contrasting it with an alternative interpretive position I call the absolute criterion view. In the introduction to the

Phenomenology Hegel raises a skeptical challenge to his own proposed project of conducting an examination of knowledge, namely, the problem of the criterion. The issue is that if Hegel wants to distinguish between genuine knowledge and mere appearances of knowledge, it seems he must have a criterion by which to do so. Thus, on the one hand, if Hegel lacks such a criterion it seems he cannot even begin his investigation, but, on the other hand, if Hegel has the criterion in question his investigation is rendered superfluous, as he would already possess what is essential to identifying genuine or absolute knowledge. The absolute criterion view, I maintain, sees Hegel as solving this problem in that his phenomenological method provides a criterion that does not fall victim to the aforementioned problem. After briefly reviewing the specific views of two thinkers that hold the absolute criterion view, namely, Michael Forster and Kenneth Westphal, I turn to three main commitments of the absolute criterion view and how they run counter to the text. Since this view takes Hegel to be working with a criterion for identifying absolute knowing, the strategy Hegel is purportedly employing is a sophisticated kind of argument by elimination, entailing the aforementioned three commitments. First, an argument by elimination requires that the measure utilized to eliminate candidates for absolute knowing is static and unchanging throughout the process. Second, this reading is also committed to the view that candidates are eliminated one after the other, providing no systematic connection between shapes of consciousness and their order. Lastly, the absolute criterion view is committed to the idea that the criterion proposed is determined extrinsically to the process of elimination itself. This criterion is specified at the outset in advance of the examination.

Showing the specific textual difficulties each of these commitments face, however, reveals an alternative and more promising reading with respect to all three commitments, namely, the transformative view. On my transformative view, Hegel is not working with a static

criterion, but instead allows for substantial transformations in what is taken to be absolute knowing and the transitions from one shape of consciousness to the next do not exhibit as elimination of the previous shape of consciousness; instead, these transitions consist in an informative “experience” of a failure that facilitates a development and advance of our conception of knowledge. And with respect to the third commitment, the transformative view maintains that the conception of knowledge and measure of what counts as absolute knowing is internal to the process of the *Phenomenology* itself, that this conception is revised and refined up until we arrive at absolute knowing. On the transformative view, then, Hegel is avoiding the problem of the criterion by conducting a developmental epistemological process in which our conception of absolute knowledge does not even come into view until the end and each transition from one shape of consciousness to the next is an informative, transformative step in the development towards absolute knowledge.

Chapter 2 brings our focus to the initial transition from ‘Consciousness’ to ‘Self-Consciousness’ within the *Phenomenology*. As mentioned, whereas ‘Consciousness’ discusses more traditional epistemological topics, ‘Self-Consciousness’ concerns itself with an array of practical topics. Thus, this transition has been referred to by some commentators as the “practical turn” of the *Phenomenology*. Accordingly, interpreting this transition is the first challenge in applying the transformative reading and the first step in meeting the second desideratum of showing the epistemological significance of each transition. The guidance of the transformative view suggests that we should expect this practical turn to *follow* from concerns about reaching absolute knowing and that the impetus for this transition will be found in the “experience” of some kind of failure in ‘Consciousness.’ Along these lines I argue that Hegel is not outright making any positive claims about the primacy of practical knowledge, but instead is showing

that we are forced to think of knowledge as practical given certain failures to understand knowledge otherwise. Focusing on the last failure of ‘Consciousness’ that leads us to ‘Self-Consciousness’ I argue that the operative concept Hegel is focusing on in this transition is “infinity.” In *Force and Understanding* the position being explored is a kind of scientific realism and Hegel finds a difficulty with understanding natural laws as connected to the phenomena they are supposed to govern. Infinity is understood in a somewhat specialized fashion as a principle of unity and self-determination that is intertwined with and transcends its manifestations, perhaps most intuitively exemplified in living beings. The shift in our conception of reality at this point, I argue, is from understanding the world as fundamentally ordered by natural laws, to understanding the world as fundamentally ordered by life. I argue, however, that this is at the same time a shift in how we understand the epistemic relationship between subject and object, in that this distinction is also thought to be ordered by life. This provides for a unity between subject and object and also an implicit self-reference on the part of the subject. After briefly outlining this essential self-awareness Hegel sees in consciousness, characterizing our new shape of ‘Self-Consciousness’ I then turn to Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness is desire. I argue that desire is quite appropriate at this juncture as it exemplifies the implicit self-awareness of consciousness and the self-determining structure of infinity. I also argue that Hegel means desire to refer to desire in general and is best captured as a drive for what Sebastian Rödl calls “infinite ends.” In contrast to finite ends, which are ends in which their satisfaction terminates the desire for them, e.g., a desire for food, the satisfaction of attaining infinite ends does not entail the desire for them is diminished. Infinite ends usually factor into broader categories of practical maintenance, such as the desire to be healthy. Taking note of this register of Hegel’s concern with desire, the result is that we begin to see knowledge as a practice of self-maintenance and its

deviation from the entire framework of seeing knowledge as a matter of meeting a criterion of adequacy.

With this somewhat abstract view that knowing ought to be understood as a practice and self-aware form of life, I turn, in Chapter 3, to the first major transition with ‘Self-Consciousness:’ from life to recognition. This is among the most well-known transitions in the *Phenomenology* and some interpretations have read Hegel as making a rather sweeping claim about the human condition: that what distinguishes us from mere animals is that we are self-aware and that sociality plays an instrumental role in making this possible. Were this Hegel’s aim, it would be difficult to see how Hegel could reasonably defend such a claim in the short stretch of text that covers this transition. More to the point, however, is that advancing such a claim would stray significantly from the self-proclaimed epistemological aim of the *Phenomenology*. But the transformative view offers us some guidance. First, the developmental aspect of the transformative view tells us that we can expect Hegel to build upon the connection between knowledge, life and infinity that we have already uncovered. To this end, I first draw upon some passages that show Hegel thinks of knowledge as bearing important structural similarities to life. Next, I show that Hegel marks life as having a dual significance for self-consciousness that corresponds to his notion of infinity. This relation to life is one that reveals a kind of opposition: on the one hand a self-conscious being is a living thing and, on the other, a self-conscious being is not merely a living thing, as it exhibits a reflected and mediated relation to its natural impulses. With these insights in hand, we have some resources by which to approach the transition to recognition and the idea that self-consciousness must somehow transcend its natural existence while not dispensing with it altogether. My reading on this point, however, is not common and so before moving forward I consider the prominent interpretation

of Fred Neuhouser who subscribes to what I call the “radical self-sufficiency view.” I argue this approach fails to appreciate this opposition and, as a result, provides an unconvincing reading of the transition to recognition. Turning to my own reading, I claim that the failure that self-consciousness experiences is that of being beholden to its natural impulses. In positing that it is itself a living being, self-consciousness fails to experience itself as self-determining and is instead determined by its object, life. Finding the object as the essential relatum in its relation, self-consciousness seeks to be its own object by way of positing another self-consciousness, making itself the object in terms of positing an identical being, but also in terms making itself an object in the eyes of another self-conscious being. The main epistemological significance of this transition, I maintain, is that it gives self-consciousness appearance, a manifestation of subjectivity for which the individual subject is responsible. In the relation of recognition the subjects are held accountable to each other in which there is a distinction between what each thinks is the case and what is the case.

While seeing knowing as, not only a practice or activity, but a social practice brings us closer to a familiar conception of knowledge, this conception alone immediately raises the question of whether we ought to understand knowledge as entirely grounded on social approval. Chapter 4 continues the task of meeting the second desideratum, but it also moves on to answer the third desideratum of revealing how ‘Self-Consciousness’ as a whole is part of a progression towards absolute knowing. It focuses on the transition from the master-servant relation to stoicism and provides an indirect answer to the above worry. What emerges from the master-servant relation is a conception of knowing as an activity centered around a universal and absolute sense of authority, an absolute sense of right and truth. This conception of knowledge is

informed by the previous transitions of 'Self-Consciousness' and brings into view the significance of the chapter as a whole.

Considering in some detail the master-servant relation and its fallout, chapter 4 is focused on how stoicism and conceptual thought--as Hegel understands it--is what emerges. As is fairly well known, the master fails to see the servant as an equal and therefore is unable to gain the recognition he seeks, whereas the servant, through his labor in service of the master, comes to acquire a "mind of his own." One approach to this is what I call the "contingency reading" which posits that the servant comes to find the master's authority to be contingent: only the demands of an individual and dependent upon his particular position. In contrast I understand the servant to regard the master's authority as absolute and not contingent and that this has the effect of the servant coming to regard his labor as meeting an absolute sense of correctness. On my reading, then, the position of servitude ironically forms a self-aware way of life that is centered around a universal sense of right and truth, leading us to stoicism. This is a significant turning point as it brings together a number of elements from the transitions of 'Self-Consciousness.' Importantly in stoicism Hegel tells us that we have hit upon a conception of knowledge where knowing is a kind of conceptual thinking. But while this may seem to be a familiar conception of knowledge it contains the important caveats that the conceptual thinking Hegel is talking about is far from anything like the thought of a Cartesian subject. Stoicism reveals conceptual thought as a way of life, a practice that is socially and practically embedded and this characterization also applies to the subsequent shapes of consciousness, namely, skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness. This notion of conceptual thinking builds upon the previous transitions and is informed by them. Life, sociality, labor and so on are all integrated into how we are grasping conceptual thinking as a self-aware mode of being in the world. This being the case, I maintain that the transformative

reading helps us to see 'Self-Consciousness' as not only epistemologically relevant, but as arriving at a quite innovative understanding of knowing.

Phenomenological Method as Transformative Critique

Chapter 1

At the outset of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel quite explicitly declares that his central task is to conduct an investigation [*Untersuchung*] of knowledge. He spends much of the introduction discussing problematic ways of thinking about knowledge. For instance, he considers problems which may fit under the heading of modern skeptical issues--conceptions of knowledge that seem to carry with them the presupposition of a pernicious divide between subject and object, e.g. thinking of knowledge as a medium or instrument standing between us and the absolute, or truth itself. Hegel also turns to ancient skepticism, all of which serves to motivate how he will proceed using his famous phenomenological method. Although unusual in his style, Hegel's elaboration of these issues certainly falls well within the scope of the concerns of traditional epistemology. But turning to 'Self-Consciousness'--only the second in roughly six major sections of the text--readers are surely surprised by Hegel's sudden plunge into a number of topics that are not recognizable epistemological issues at all. He claims that self-consciousness is "desire itself," [*Begierde überhaupt*] that it attains its "satisfaction [*Befriedigung*] only in another self-consciousness" and proceeds to discuss a "struggle of life and death" [*Kampf auf Leben und Tod*] resulting in the enslavement of one of the participants, only to eventually end 'Self-Consciousness' with a discussion of the Unhappy Consciousness, a religious consciousness with strong allusions to the Catholic Church. Given such a radical turn so early in the text it is natural for interpreters to think Hegel means his "investigation" of knowledge to really be an elaboration

of his own sophisticated view of cognition that is both much broader in scope than epistemology typically is and presupposes his own socio-historical account of “Spirit.” Indeed, the trajectory of the text as a whole suggests such a reading as Hegel continues to discuss many topics falling outside of the scope of traditional epistemology well after ‘Self-Consciousness.’ But if Hegel were simply presupposing his own account of cognition or Spirit, this would be a far cry from any kind of *examination* or *investigation* of knowledge and taking Hegel to be going against his own description of his project is certainly an uncharitable interpretation of a systematic thinker. To what extent we may be mischaracterizing Hegel’s project hinges on precisely what Hegel means by an “investigation of knowledge” and, I think, only a brief look at Hegel’s method reveals that he takes very seriously the idea that he is engaging in a critical project.¹

Even if Hegel has straightforwardly epistemological concerns that motivate his phenomenological method, the method itself is far from conventional. He maintains that the path of the *Phenomenology* will not result in a mere theory of knowledge, that is, a proposed thesis of what knowledge amounts to that is supported by argument; rather, his examination purports to be a process that will bring us to the standpoint of absolute knowing itself. This ambitious task, however, is not simply an expression of grandiosity. Hegel thinks that an examination of knowledge *must* proceed in such a way. He motivates his phenomenological method by considering the ancient skeptical problem of the criterion. This problem is pressing at the outset because, as Hegel argues, it seemingly makes a genuine investigation of knowledge impossible. If Hegel wants to distinguish between genuine knowledge and mere appearances of knowledge he seems to need a grounding standard by which to do so. The difficulty is that, on the one hand,

¹ It is generally accepted among commentators today that Hegel has serious epistemological ambitions in the *Phenomenology*. The view that he held true to something that can be genuinely called a critical work is less common. In the following I will address a few commentators directly in sorting out exactly what Hegel had in mind in his critical project.

if Hegel has this criterion of genuine knowledge at his disposal then he need not conduct such an investigation, as the examination would be rendered superfluous. On the other hand, if Hegel does not possess this criterion it seems that he has no basis on which to conduct his investigation. Hegel's methodology, then, is intended to avoid this problem and allow him to conduct a genuinely critical examination of knowledge itself.

Whether Hegel is successful with his proposed project or not, it seems clear that Hegel is quite concerned to provide a thoroughgoing examination of knowledge. Indeed, his phenomenological method is supposed to be chiefly concerned with precisely the possibility of conducting such an investigation. Even Hegel's language—that of aiming at "absolute knowing" and having knowledge of the absolute—suggest not only are his epistemological ambition serious, but that he is concerned with philosophical knowledge: knowledge of reality in general and the broadest sense in which we are justified in our fundamental beliefs about the world.² So thinking that Hegel's turn to topics like those contained in 'Self-Consciousness' can be explained by his mere advancement of his own assumptions about cognition seems to be at best implausible and, at worst, casts Hegel's project as incoherent at its foundation. With the unusual path of the *Phenomenology* itself and Hegel's epistemological ambitions, there seems to be a great deal at stake in understanding how exactly Hegel sees his methodology to allow him to proceed. Not only do we need to see his project as a serious epistemological investigation, but we also need to understand it such that it can (at least potentially) place somewhat unusual claims about knowledge within that investigation.

² Hegel's orientation toward his project should make it clear that he is not concerned with doing something like an exhaustive project of analyzing any phenomenon that might answer to the term "knowledge" in various contexts. Instead, Hegel seems to be after our central and general conception of knowledge that would precede various classifications into types of knowledge such as a priori, a posteriori, knowledge by testimony and the like.

In this chapter I consider Hegel's methodology and propose an interpretive strategy for dealing with the above issue. I maintain that Hegel's project is indeed a critical project and one that is fundamentally shaped by concerns with the problem of the criterion. I understand Hegel's phenomenological method to outline a process of developmental transformation and label this process *transformative critique*.³ His methodology, I maintain, is intended to allow us to progress towards genuine knowledge without assuming we already have genuine knowledge at our disposal and, thus, we need not secure the validity of our criterion for absolute knowledge in advance. Instead, we conduct a kind of "internal," or "radical" critique of knowledge⁴ that constitutes a process of refinement and self-correction of our capacity to know—the *Bildung*, or formation, of knowledge—up to the speculative standpoint of science. Hegel's distinctively developmental approach allows him to avoid the problem of the criterion by forgoing the employment of some overarching and uniform standard by which to evaluate various conceptions of knowledge. His method is radical in the sense that it allows for *any* presupposition about the genuine grounds of knowledge to be put in jeopardy, including his own. Moreover, this developmental process is supposed to arrive at absolute knowing in its consummation, entailing that absolute knowing will only clearly come into view at the end of the *Phenomenology* and, thus, cannot act as an explicit criterion guiding the investigation. Seeing Hegel's project as a process of transformative critique pushes our focus away from thinking of the phenomenological method as itself a kind of criterion against which to evaluate various

³ William Bristow also uses this term to refer to Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* in his 'Hegel and the Transformation of Philosophical Critique.' (2007) While I take myself to be largely in agreement with Bristow on his understanding of this term, our work differs in emphasis. Bristow focuses mainly on the juxtaposition between Kant and Hegel on the notion of critique and here I concern myself with different interpretative strategies regarding the *Phenomenology* itself.

⁴ Commentators are often quick to point out that the *Phenomenology* involves an "internal" critique of some sort, but Habermas (1968) uses the term "radical critique" to denote this aspect of Hegel's project. In the following I hope to make some way towards filling out such descriptions.

shapes of consciousness and turns our focus towards seeing the *Phenomenology* as essentially a progression of self-correction and self-development requiring careful attention to the commitments of different shapes of consciousness.

After developing the problem of the criterion in section 1 and showing that Hegel's concern with this problem is a concern with the possibility of doing epistemology at all, I turn in section 2 to identify a general interpretive approach that fails to appreciate this issue. I call this problematic approach the "absolute criterion" view as it takes Hegel's phenomenological method to act as a criterion for identifying absolute knowing. Sections 3 and 4 consider two examples of interpretations that subscribe to the "absolute criterion" view, namely, that of Michael Forster and Kenneth Westphal. The preliminary issues I identify in their views motivate the need for a different interpretative approach to understanding Hegel's project as a whole. In section 5 I articulate my transformative view by way of juxtaposing it against the "absolute criterion" view and in section 6 I elaborate on this difference by considering three main commitments of the absolute criterion view. These commitments, I argue, raise a number of textual and philosophical problems for the absolute criterion view and reveal the transformative reading as providing promising alternative lines of interpretation at each turn. Section 7 summarizes how recognizing Hegel's project as a developmental process of transformation can guide us in approaching specific transitions in the text, such as those within 'Self-Consciousness.'

1. The Problem of the Criterion

While Hegel is quite clear that the *Phenomenology* is an investigation of knowledge and it is well known that Hegel had concern and respect for skepticism, it is much less clear exactly how Hegel's

phenomenological method is somehow a response to skepticism.⁵ In this first section I maintain that the central skeptical problem that provides the motivation for Hegel's phenomenological method is the problem of the criterion. What Hegel sees in the problem of the criterion is that the attempt to reach for some higher-order principle by which to evaluate knowledge seems to be doomed to failure from the outset. Considering this problem will give rise to two interpretations of how Hegel's phenomenological method is a response in the subsequent sections.

In the introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel considers an ancient skeptical challenge that seems to be particularly threatening to his task of conducting an investigation into the "the truth of knowledge": the problem of the criterion. This problem has to do with attempting to adjudicate between competing knowledge claims each of which appeals to a different criterion of truth. Here is a formulation of this problem put forth rather concisely by Sextus Empiricus.

"[I]n order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion [of truth], we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided." (*Outlines of Scepticism*, 2:4, sec. 20)⁶

The issue can be summarized as follows. Given two conflicting knowledge claims, each that appeal to different criteria of truth, we can only judge which is correct by considering the validity of the criteria of each claim. But in order to evaluate the different criteria of truth, it seems that we must already have some accepted standard by which to evaluate these criteria.

This obviously leads to trouble. If we need a further criterion to evaluate the original criteria of

⁵ To begin with, commentators have disagreed about specifically which kind of skeptical threat Hegel is concerned with. While Westphal (1989) takes Hegel to be directly concerned with the problem of the criterion, Forster (1989) thinks Hegel is chiefly concerned with Pyrrhonian skepticism and the problem of equipollence. Still, many thinkers naturally take Hegel's main concern to be a kind of Kantian skepticism. Certainly these problems do not preclude one another, but focusing on one rather than another can significantly shape one's reading of the *Phenomenology* as a whole.

⁶ Westphal (1998 and 2009) cites this very passage from Sextus in his commentary on Hegel and, as we will see Hegel's own formulation bears a striking resemblance.

the claims in dispute, then it looks as if we can raise the same problem for this further criterion.⁷ We then find ourselves in a regress that can be stopped, it seems, only by circularity or dogmatic assertion.⁸

Hegel's own formulation of this problem arises in his discussion of a starting point for his project in the *Phenomenology*. In the introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel proposes his phenomenological method as a viable way to approach an understanding of knowledge. This method consists in considering different shapes of consciousness—outlooks that advance some conception of knowledge—and the phenomenology progresses from, roughly speaking, inadequate conceptions of knowledge to more adequate conceptions, eventually arriving at “absolute knowing.” In Hegelian terms this method consists in moving from phenomenal knowledge, or mere appearances of knowledge, to knowledge as it is in-itself, or genuine knowledge.⁹ This brief outline of his project, however, seems to lead immediately to the aforementioned problem. The worry is that, despite his claim that he will arrive at absolute knowledge at the end of his inquiry, in order for Hegel to begin considering different conceptions of knowledge, he must have some criterion already in place by which to judge them.

“This exposition, represented as the *conduct of science* [*Verhalten der Wissenschaft*] in relation to knowing *as it appears* [*erscheinenden Wissen*], and as an *investigation and testing of the reality of cognition* [*Untersuchung und Prüfung der Realität des Erkennens*] looks as if it is unable to take place without having some kind of presupposition which underlies it as a *standard* [*Maßstab*].” (Pinkard, pp. 54-55, par. 81, emphasis in the original)

The challenge Hegel is presenting to himself is whether he can even *begin* his purported investigation since whatever criterion he will employ would stand in need of justification and this insight sets in motion a vicious regress preventing him from getting any closer to the truth of

⁷ Here I am formulating this issue in terms of an infinite regress, but Sextus seems to present the issue in terms of a problem of circularity.

⁸ These unappealing options can be found among the Five Modes of Agrippa.

⁹ For some helpful remarks about the role of “appearances” in Hegel's investigation see Siep (2015; pp. 52-55).

knowledge.¹⁰ His worry (or at least the worry he is entertaining) is that “no examination can take place at all.”¹¹ Without such a grounding standard to differentiate between genuine knowledge and mere appearances of knowledge Hegel cannot conduct his examination, but having such a standard renders his so-called “examination” superfluous, as he would already have the standard of knowledge he seeks.¹²

This difficulty is one that Hegel also mentions elsewhere, and perhaps his most entertaining and intuitive way of putting this problem is in a metaphor: that one is attempting to learn how to swim “before venturing into the water.”¹³ The point is that an examination of knowledge is itself the exercise of our capacity to know and this presents unique troubles for the prospect of being able to examine knowledge. Above the issue is whether we can investigate knowledge at all and the problem of the criterion highlights this issue, but Hegel goes on to sharpen the issue. He argues that since we always appeal to some standard of correctness in our evaluation, it seems that such an approach would prevent us from being able to recognize genuine knowledge or being able to make epistemological advances. He begins to make this point by characterizing an investigation of knowledge in the following way: “If we then investigate the truth of knowing, it seems that we are investigating what knowing is *in itself*.”¹⁴ Hegel describes our task as one of investigating the “in itself” of knowledge, its essence, or the genuine standard of truth. Now if we grant that we can begin such an investigation it seems that we must proceed by evaluating the standard in question

¹⁰ Pinkard (1996; p. 6) notes this distinctive formulation of the Problem of the Criterion in which Hegel sees this problem as one that seems to prevent him from beginning his investigation rather than a problem that must be solved by way of performing his investigation.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² It is worth noting that seeing the problem of the criterion as a problem evinces that one is already employing some criterion of epistemological adequacy. This insight, as we will see, is in line with Hegel's developmental approach in which the recognition of inconsistencies are worked out by the transformation of our protagonist.

¹³ *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol 2*. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson trans. University of Nebraska Press (1995)

¹⁴ Pinkard, p. 55, par. 83.

against our own. We would then be evaluating the in-itself of knowledge against what we think a good account of knowledge ought to be. Thus, even if we are satisfied with the adequacy of the account of knowledge we are examining, all we have proved is that standard in question is consistent with, or identical to, our own, i.e., that the purported standard of knowledge is what we *think* knowledge is. In such a case, “What we would assert to be its essence [the essence of knowledge] would not be its truth but merely our knowledge of it.”¹⁵ Consequently, the standard we employ, i.e., the standard “within us,” would not have to “recognize the validity” of the standard we are supposedly investigating. This method of investigation would actually prevent us from making any epistemological advance as we are unable to move beyond the standard of knowledge we already have.

2. The Absolute Criterion View

So far it should be clear that in these passages Hegel is concerned with the possibility of genuinely investigating knowledge. We have seen that Hegel is entertaining the idea that the problem of the criterion may threaten the possibility of such an investigation by way of evaluating forms of knowledge against some pre-established epistemological criterion. Since he provides a particularly demanding challenge to his proposed program, and a challenge that is, I think, well formulated, it is very unlikely that Hegel intends to brush off this problem and simply proceed to advance his own controversial epistemological theory. Moreover, Hegel’s phenomenological method is clearly intended to address this issue insofar as it offers a path forward. But exactly what this methodology consists in and how we are to understand it to deal with something like the problem of the criterion is much less clear.

¹⁵ Ibid.

One possible interpretive strategy is to read Hegel as attempting to meet the challenge contained within the problem of the criterion. That is, one might think Hegel is motivating the use of his own criterion of epistemological adequacy—a criterion that does not admit of the aforementioned problem. This interpretive strategy I call the “absolute criterion view:” that Hegel’s phenomenological method offers a criterion by which we are able to identify absolute knowing. If Hegel sees the problem of the criterion to be pressing, then it would seem that the simplest solution is for Hegel’s methodology to straightforwardly answer the problem by offering a standard that does not succumb to pitfalls we have outlined. Shortly I will go on to argue that this is a significant misinterpretation of Hegel’s project and that Hegel thinks the problem of the criterion rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of our capacity for knowledge. But at this point it is important to highlight that the absolute criterion view consists in a distinct outlook on Hegel’s methodology and involves some substantial commitments, which I want to briefly summarize at the outset.

In contrast to thinking that the problem of the criterion rests on a misunderstanding, as I will suggest, the absolute criterion view takes the problem of the criterion to be pressing in that it views a grounding standard to be necessary in order to proceed with our investigation. The absolute criterion view admits that if we want to distinguish absolute knowing from other mere appearances of knowledge we will need a measure by which to make that distinction. On this view, then, the problem of the criterion is taken to be a genuine problem. Shortly we will consider some candidates for such a measure that is able to somehow avoid the problem of the criterion, but the mere fact of taking Hegel to be trying to solve this problem by advancing such a measure in his phenomenological method lends a certain shape to Hegel’s project.

Even at a very schematic level, the idea that Hegel's phenomenological method is supposed to give us something like a criterion to distinguish between what does and does not count as absolute knowledge requires accepting at least two points at the outset. First is that the supposedly unproblematic criterion Hegel outlines is specified in advance of the investigation. Not only is this because Hegel does in fact present his phenomenological method in the introduction before proceeding to the actual shapes of consciousness within the text, but also, as we have pointed out, this criterion must be on hand in order to begin to evaluate any shape of consciousness. Along the same lines, the second commitment is that this criterion must be uniform throughout the process of the *Phenomenology*. Specifying what our criterion of adequacy is at the outset at least implies that this very same measure will be used throughout the investigation. More to the point, however, is that if we are to use such a criterion to distinguish between genuine knowledge and mere appearances of knowledge, the measure employed must be common to both. The measure that a mere appearance of knowledge *cannot* meet ought to be the same measure that absolute knowledge *does* meet. Looking at these two points, we get a sense of the character of the investigation Hegel is undertaking with respect to the movement through the various shapes of consciousness up to absolute knowledge. On the absolute criterion view, this movement looks like, roughly, an evaluation of each shape of consciousness—one after the other—against the already specified criterion until we finally arrive at one shape of consciousness that actually does meet the criterion in question, namely, absolute knowing.

This conception of Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* seems to be precisely the conception of an investigation of knowledge that Hegel presents the problem of the criterion to threaten. But if the criterion Hegel is able to articulate in his phenomenological method is not subject to this problem, then it would seem that he could proceed with his investigation without

having an investigation that is really novel in its form. That is, the absolute criterion view reads Hegel as having a unique criterion rather than a unique form of investigation. In the next two sections I will consider the views of Forster and Westphal, each who I argue subscribe to the absolute criterion view and, accordingly, provide an interpretation of what kind of criterion Hegel will employ in his investigation that will not fall victim to the problem of the criterion. And both, I will argue, still fall victim to the problem of the criterion. After considering their views I will propose that the source of the problem is that they do not recognize that Hegel takes his project to have a different form than the one outlined in brief above. Hegel does not think we can investigate knowledge in the same way we can investigate other objects and because of this his distinctively developmental approach has a fundamentally different shape than the kind of investigation we have considered thus far.

3. Forster's Absolute Criterion

Forster sees Hegel as primarily concerned with two skeptical problems: the problem of equipollence and the problem of concept instantiation. Here I will only consider the former. The problem of equipollence is that whatever claim one holds, one can give an opposing claim of equal merit. Thus, if one claims P, then the skeptical challenge is that one can claim not-P with an equal degree of argumentative force. Despite this being a problem for the epistemologist, equipollence figures into a positive movement for the skeptic, specifically in the tradition of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Such a procedure provides the means by which one is prevented from ascending to the truth of either proposition and achieves the suspension of belief (*Epoché*) allowing one to find a state of tranquillity (*Ataraxia*).¹⁶ The problem of equipollence is surely not identical to the problem

¹⁶ The description above parallels Sextus' own definition of skepticism: "Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability which, because of the

of the criterion and Hegel does not, so far as I can tell, deal with the former directly in the introduction. However it is not difficult to see how these problems are connected. Confronted with two conflicting knowledge claims, each of which rest on different, yet equally plausible, criteria for truth, we are confronted with an instance of the problem of equipollence. Forster himself makes such a connection and states that the proposed solution he attributes to Hegel applies just as much to the problem of the criterion as it does to the problem of equipollence.¹⁷

Focusing on the problem of equipollence, Forster sees Hegel not so much answering this problem as undercutting it. He first identifies at least one condition that must hold for this problem to be threatening: “It would seem that an equipollence problem or anything like it could arise for the claim of Hegel’s own system if there were coherent alternative viewpoints.”¹⁸ Without such an opposing position, one could not maintain that there is an opposite with equal right. Framing the problem in this way, Hegel is set with the clear task of “undertaking to demonstrate that *there are no coherent alternative viewpoints whatever*.”¹⁹ The examination of each form of knowledge in the *Phenomenology* is then understood as a rejection of those positions as internally inconsistent, eventually leading us to absolute knowing—Hegel’s own position and the standpoint of science—as the only internally consistent position and, thus, a position that has no opposite. According to Forster, Hegel shows that the problem of equipollence does not apply to his own philosophical position and that the problem of the criterion does not apply as well. Hegel’s absolute knowing has no competing alternative and also no competing criterion of knowledge.

equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of belief and afterwards to tranquillity.” *Outlines of Scepticism*; (Book 1; section iv)

¹⁷ See Forster (1998; pp. 346-7, fn. 127)

¹⁸ Forster (1989; pp. 108)

¹⁹ (Ibid). Italics are in the original text.

Part of what Forster sets out to accomplish is to show that Hegel had serious epistemological concerns. Among these was his concern to maintain a view that is not susceptible to ancient skeptical problems, but this is only one example of the standards of epistemological rigor Forster attributes to Hegel. In addition, Forster outlines three “standards of epistemological respectability” that Hegel held himself to.²⁰ These can be summarized briefly as follows. Hegel demands that he demonstrate his own philosophical position as non-arbitrary, demonstrate that all other viewpoints are inferior to his own and demonstrate that the circumstances for each alternative view be compelling on the basis of its own viewpoint.²¹ These amount to the conditions for a “proof of Philosophical Science for all nonscientific viewpoints.”²² Forster goes on to emphasize that Hegel holds himself to a “complex and demanding epistemological standard” and that “in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel made his most earnest and explicit attempt to meet this additional standard” of providing such a proof.²³

With the test of internal consistency and the task of demonstrating that there is no other coherent alternative viewpoint, we have Forster’s absolute criterion. This criterion of epistemological adequacy is supposed to not fall victim to the problem of the criterion since it would dismiss any alternative position that would give rise to the infinite regress we presented in section 1. Moreover, it certainly seems that the characterization of Hegel’s project as revealing inconsistencies and inadequacies in the shapes of consciousness leading up to absolute knowing is a fair characterization. But the ideas of “internal consistency,” a “coherent” viewpoint and a position being “self-defeating” are notions that need to be taken with great care. The level at which Forster uses these terms entails that Hegel approaches his task with a *uniform* conception of

²⁰ Forster (1989; p. 113)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Forster (1989; p. 113 and 114).

consistency or coherence. As we have pointed out, for Hegel's project to even make sense--on Forster's reading--we must have a general sense of epistemological or logical consistency that will allow us to see that Hegel's own position is consistent while other supposed competing viewpoints are not. Without this uniform standard of adequacy, albeit a quite general one, it is unclear how Hegel can proceed or make his own position stand out. The idea of a "coherent viewpoint," then, takes on the role of the "grounding standard" to guide Hegel's entire project.

Having a uniform standard of logical consistency immediately raises the question of whether the specific notion of logical consistency we are using is the correct one. Since it provides the measure by which mere appearances of knowledge are proven to be inconsistent and absolute knowing is proven to be consistent, the measure itself is not examined, it is only employed. We are in danger here of falling into precisely the trap Hegel mentions of only demonstrating that "absolute knowing" meets our standards of what we *think* absolute knowing is. Given a different sense of logical consistency we might identify a different conception of knowledge that we label as "absolute." Since the criterion in question, although answering to the label of "internal consistency," is really specified independently from any specific shape of consciousness to allow for the examination to take place, it requires some form of validation that it is the correct criterion to use. Thus, we are faced with the problem of having to justify the measure of logical, internal consistency needed to be able to undergo this kind of investigation at all. In short, we arrive back at precisely the problem of the criterion.

4. Westphal's Absolute Criterion

One might identify a lack of reflexivity as the source of the problem with Forster's view--that he must make room for us to reflexively or self-consciously evaluate the notion of logical consistency

being employed. Turning to Westphal's view we find a much greater emphasis on the self-evaluation of knowledge in the *Phenomenology*. He finds Hegel to be directly concerned with the Pyrrhonian tropes and in particular the "Dilemma" of the Criterion and the trope of circularity.²⁴ Westphal notes a distinction between first-order knowledge claims about the world itself and second-order claims about what is a good or correct form of knowledge, and he sees that "Hegel takes a methodological cue from Sextus' dilemma in recognizing that the dilemma arises and must be met at the second level of epistemological debate."²⁵ As I have interpreted Hegel so far, the idea that Hegel takes the problem of the criterion as targeting second-order, epistemological claims, i.e. claims about what knowledge is, is not terribly controversial.²⁶ But Westphal takes a more substantial stand in that he thinks Hegel intends to *solve* this problem by articulating a second-order criterion that is impervious to the dilemma, a strategy that I have called the absolute criterion view.

Westphal reads Hegel as endorsing a kind of circularity that is not problematic, what he calls a "virtuous" circularity that involves a kind of self-critical assessment of our epistemic criteria.²⁷ His argument is as follows. Circularity is problematic "not because a series of grounds of proof mutually support each other, but because such a series appears to offer no independent

²⁴ I suspect that Westphal intends to refer to the first and fifth Modes of Agrippa, that of disagreement and circularity, respectively. What he calls the "Dilemma" of the Criterion I have been referring to as a problem in order to give this issue broader scope. It is not entirely clear why Westphal finds this problem to come in the form of a dilemma since I do not see that Sextus or Hegel leave us with two horns with which to deal.

²⁵ Westphal (1998; p. 82).

²⁶ This comes with a caveat that will prove to be significant further down the line. While I agree that Hegel is concerned with genuine knowledge, or the right account of knowledge--which can be described as knowledge of knowledge and thereby thought of as second-order in some sense--I do not think that Hegel would quickly subscribe to any hard and fast distinction between first order knowledge claims about the world and second order knowledge claims about knowledge or epistemic states. This kind of distinction would already begin to turn on a certain conception of the distinction between mind and world, the very kind of distinction that Hegel wants to investigate. But I will follow Westphal's terminology here in order to develop what I take to be the shortcomings of his interpretation.

²⁷ This term he uses in (1989; p. 102).

proof to convince any dissenter.”²⁸ Vicious circularity occurs when we have only affirmations that are mutually supporting and none of the grounds of our claims are put into question. But if we had a circular proof which consisted in a procedure for the evaluation, revision and replacement of specific claims and grounds, then we would have a means by which to convince dissenters of the warrant for each claim while the series of grounds of proof mutually support each other. Such a process would be a self-critical assessment of the grounds for our claims and, according to Westphal, “If constructive self-criticism is possible, we are not locked into the forced options epitomized in the Five Modes of Agrippa.”

Describing Hegel as “the original pragmatic realist,”²⁹ Westphal cites Sellars as formulating the key idea of this school of thought: that knowledge “is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once.”³⁰ The details of exactly how Westphal sees Hegel to execute this program are quite sophisticated and need not be expounded here.³¹ For our purposes it suffices to note that Hegel’s solution to the problem of the criterion is at the level of an epistemological program, namely his phenomenological method, which enables us to give epistemic (first-order) criteria proper warrant. This idea of a self-critical enterprise appears as a promising line of thought and, as we will see shortly, certainly bears a striking resemblance to the core ideas of Hegel’s method. As with Forster, we can see a strategy of appealing to the evaluation of shapes of consciousness in terms of their internal consistency: if a model of knowledge is genuinely critiqued from within, then we seem to forgo the need for some

²⁸ Westphal (2003; p. 153)

²⁹ Westphal (2003; p. 158)

³⁰ Sellars (1963; p. 170)

³¹ Indeed, Westphal claims that we can find a fourfold distinction of the elements of cognition in Hegel, making up the eight elements of knowledge as a relation. (1988; p. 181)

uniform epistemological standard to ground our investigation and would undercut the problem of the criterion.

But while Westphal places an emphasis on the self-correcting and self-critical feature of the project he thinks Hegel is pursuing, his description of this project evinces that what is meant by an “internal” evaluation actually amounts to an evaluation against a standard of adequacy that is formulated in advance of and independently from the shapes of consciousness that are to be evaluated. Westphal is quite open about characterizing Hegel as advancing a *criterion* for an adequate theory of knowledge and, in fact, thinks this standard can be broken down into five criteria.³² These criteria are supposed to outline what it is for an epistemological theory to accord with its own principles. It is this standard of adequacy that is applied to each shape of consciousness to determine if it is “internally consistent.” And this measure is what allows Hegel to proceed to demonstrate the “success of his defense of his own views” which “depends on critically rejecting all alternatives.” Similarly to Forster’s view, Westphal sees Hegel’s project as a unique sort of “argument by elimination”³³ For Westphal not only do we need a common, uniform criterion of adequacy to reveal Hegel’s account as the only one that actually meets this standard, but Westphal even questions whether Hegel’s account in fact does meet this standard.³⁴ Both points entail that the measure that grounds the investigation is independent from absolute knowing as it appears in the *Phenomenology*. So the self-critical enterprise that calls various claims into question and provides independent proof for these claims when necessary is a process that conforms to an overarching and fixed sense of what counts as adequate or inconsistent. What allows us to engage in a process of “virtuous circularity” and to come to a definitive conclusion is

³² Westphal (1988; p 184)

³³ Westphal (1998; p. 85).

³⁴ Westphal (1988; p. 184)

the already established criterion of adequacy that is supposed to be immune to the problem of the criterion.

Westphal's characterization of Hegel's project raises two issues. First is that the supposed "internal" critique of each shape of consciousness substantially relies on evaluating a shape of consciousness against the five criteria for consistency Westphal articulates and understands to apply to different shapes of consciousness uniformly. Similarly to Forster, Westphal needs a uniform standard of adequacy to reveal Hegel's view as meeting the same standard which alternative views fail to meet. This point is further emphasized by Westphal's concern with the completeness of Hegel's proof—that Hegel has committed himself to rejecting an exhaustive list of all other alternative views. Second, while Westphal thinks Hegel has a quite sophisticated and "formidable" set of criteria, there is plenty of room to offer alternative criteria or add or subtract criteria from the list presented. Even if we do not take issue with the method of virtuous circularity, we can understand this approach as based on more, less or different principles of epistemological adequacy, resulting in the correction of different beliefs and arriving at a different notion of absolute knowing. Here I do not want to evaluate the specific criteria Westphal formulates or propose different ones. The point to emphasize is that as soon as we recognize that there is a need to justify the criteria Westphal specifies, the problem of the criterion emerges. In attempting to justify the criteria in question we lapse into again having to show why our notion of epistemological adequacy and the means of justifying it are better than some given alternative, a task that, so far as we can see, will lead to an infinite regress.

5. The Transformative View

The absolute criterion view understands Hegel to articulate a criterion that will both be impervious to the problem of the criterion and allow us to identify absolute knowing. I have presented Forster and Westphal as advancing such a view and we can identify at least one further common feature to their views. They both subscribe to the idea that Hegel's project consists in a kind of argument by elimination wherein mere appearances of knowledge are eliminated when evaluated against the absolute criterion in question. This lends a specific shape to Hegel's project and one that we recognized as intertwined with the notion of Hegel operating with a predetermined criterion. Specifically, the idea of eliminating alternative accounts of knowledge and evaluating absolute knowing as satisfactory requires having a criterion in hand. I have already indicated that the criteria advanced by Westphal and Forster do not seem to be successful in avoiding the problem of the criterion and in the next section I will argue that there are a series of commitments that are involved in adopting the absolute criterion view, which point to more general philosophical and textual problems. In this section, however, I want to present first some passages that throw further suspicion on the idea that Hegel's program consists in an argument by elimination and, second, give a brief summary of an alternative understanding of Hegel's project, what I call the "transformative view." On the latter view, Hegel is not simply *eliminating* mere appearances of knowledge; rather the failure of different shapes of consciousness to be "internally consistent" is a constructive process that prompts a transformative revision of our concept of knowledge and these revisions build upon one another until reaching the position of absolute knowing.

Hegel describes the end and central aim of the *Phenomenology*, absolute knowing, in a number of ways in the preface and introduction which seem to indicate a fairly unique conception of the role the final chapter of this text is supposed to fill. It is well known that Hegel thought readers need to proceed through the entire text and traverse the various shapes of consciousness

before reaching absolute knowing and Hegel's remarks about his project offer a foothold on just why this is the case.

“The experience through which consciousness learns about itself can, according to its concept, comprehend within itself nothing less than the whole [*ganze*] system of consciousness, or the whole realm of the truth of spirit. . .” (Pinkard p. 58, par. 89)

There are two significant features of this passage to focus on. First is the way Hegel talks about the end of our task, emphasizing that we must comprehend the entire [*ganze*] system of consciousness and truth of spirit. Certainly we have seen the two instances of the absolute criterion view tackle precisely this issue. Both Forster and Westphal see Hegel as tasked with eliminating an exhaustive list of alternative conceptions of knowledge and Westphal in particular worries about the purported completeness of Hegel's undertaking. But there is a second feature of the above that does not seem to be captured by thinking of his project as an exhaustive argument by elimination. Hegel states that this comprehension of the entire truth of spirit is a matter of what consciousness “learns about itself” and that this comprehension is “within itself.” This emphasis on the self-relational aspect of Hegel's project does not readily resonate with an argument by elimination, which can apply to various objects of examination. And these are not passing thoughts. Hegel describes his project as “the essence completing itself through its own development” and that the nature of the absolute “consists just in this: to be actual, to be subject, or, to be the becoming-of-itself.”³⁵ More explicitly, he claims that “The goal [of the *Phenomenology*] is the point at which knowing no longer needs to go beyond its own self, where knowing finds itself. . .”³⁶

These repeated characterizations seem to be describing not merely some reflective component that is tacked on to Hegel's project; rather they seem to describe the end point of this project as fundamentally shaped by a kind of self-realization. This suggests that, at a minimum,

³⁵ Pinkard p. 13, par. 20.

³⁶ Pinkard, p. 54, par. 80.

thinking of the *Phenomenology* as an exhaustive checklist of rejecting alternative views fails to capture something quite important to his project. The endpoint of identifying absolute knowing as the only conception of knowledge that meets our criterion while all others fail, does not describe this endeavor as a matter of self-realization in any robust sense. Couple this with our previous discussion revealing that we don't have substantial reason to think either Westpahl's or Forster's absolute criterion is successful in avoiding the problem of the criterion and we have sufficient motivation to consider revising our interpretive strategy.

The alternative strategy I offer is a transformative view of how the *Phenomenology* proceeds. The transformative view I advocate for maintains that, negatively, there is no overarching and uniform criterion that each shape of consciousness is evaluated against. Positively, the transformative view maintains that in the *Phenomenology* the operative conception of knowledge transforms from one shape of consciousness to the next, fundamentally shifting the internal standard of adequacy that each shape of consciousness holds itself to and building upon each failure to meet that standard. These transformations in our conception of knowledge, then, mark moments of self-correction that ultimately lead us to absolute knowing. The absence of any uniform criterion that is specified at the outset provides a sharp distinction between the transformative view and the absolute criterion view, but this also entails that the transformative view has a much different understanding of the role of absolute knowing as the end point of the *Phenomenology*. Given that the standards of adequacy are altered from one shape of consciousness to the next, the correct standard, or--perhaps more broadly and inclusively--the correct conception

of knowledge, does not come into view until the end of the *Phenomenology*.³⁷³⁸ It is this transformative process that brings about the correct understanding of knowledge. If this is the case, then there is no need to specify a rigorous epistemological standard that is impervious to the problem of the criterion at the outset. Instead, we can understand the *Phenomenology* as a process of bringing into view absolute knowing. On this view, Hegel's project is less a matter of *identifying* absolute knowing and more a matter of refining our grasp and exercise of knowledge and fully realizing this capacity. The transformative view sees the aim of the *Phenomenology* as essentially an aim of self-realization and so can be accurately described as a cognition "completing itself through its own development."

This is merely a preliminary sketch of the transformative view and in the next section I will expand on this reading in conjunction with some pivotal moments in the text. But before moving onto the details of how this view both contrasts with the absolute criterion strategy and accounts for some key passages, we should note the nature of the transformative self-correction I mentioned. The idea that the "test" for each shape of consciousness involves a kind of internal examination is something that both Forster and Westphal discussed. But one issue we encountered is that the standard of what counts as "internally" consistent was not thought to be wholly specified internally to a given shape of consciousness, as the criteria we considered were uniform in applying to all of the shapes consciousness to allow for an argument by elimination. On the absolute criterion view,

³⁷ Here I mean to indicate that we should not assume that absolute knowing will be an understanding of knowledge that operates with a criterion at all. There are alternative conceptions of knowledge where cognition is not understood in terms of beliefs meeting some explicit standard of adequacy at all.

³⁸ A question that might arise at this point is whether Hegel's project, along the lines I am casting it on the transformative view, presupposes that there is genuine knowledge, a correct conception of knowledge, thwarting the possibility that the skeptical position that there is no knowledge at all, could be correct. To a certain the transformative view is consistent with this process not reaching an end, but this realization, per Hegel's method, would seem to suggest merely the emergence of a new conception of knowledge and the continuation of the process. So while not presupposing that there *must* be genuine knowledge, Hegel's outlook implies that we cannot rest with a skeptical conclusion.

absolute knowing is a shape of consciousness that meets a standard of adequacy specified in advance and independently of absolute knowing itself. On the transformative view, however, we are forgoing such a uniform and overarching standard leaving any standard of adequacy to be grounded only in what a shape of consciousness sets for itself and providing a more robust sense of self-relation. But the appeal to a uniform standard of adequacy is not without its motivation. There is, perhaps, a concern here that if Hegel is only after this sort of internal consistency without appeal to any independent standard of epistemological adequacy, then this opens his notion of absolute knowing up to the charge of a pernicious coherentism.

To allay this worry we need to give consideration to the scope of both what is at issue with the notion of “internal consistency” that we have been discussing and the scope of what we understand to be the self-correction taking place. The term “internal consistency” can give a somewhat formal gloss on what is a more substantial issue. Specifying that a conception of knowledge needs to be consistent with its own principles sets a standard of what counts as proper justification and warrant for a conception of knowledge. If we are then to not *assume* some uniform standard of what counts as validity or justification, then we are calling into question even these fundamental standards to how we understand knowledge in general. This would challenge assumptions about our intuitions about all sorts of epistemological concepts including “subject,” “object,” “reality” and how we understand these things to be related. Such challenges would include common concerns about the shortcomings of a coherentist account of knowledge and even the idea that beliefs must correspond to some mind-independent reality. On the other hand, in the midst of such challenges the self-correction of our capacity to know can make substantial revisions to how we understand ourselves as related to the world. In short, the grievances we have about why we find a coherentist account of knowledge to be problematic would be a part of how we

revise our understanding of knowledge and attempt to make it consistent with its own principles. This points us in the direction of a quite substantial understanding of an investigation of knowledge wherein concepts fundamental to epistemology are challenged and revised. On the transformative view this is precisely the kind of transformative self-correction the *Phenomenology* purports to facilitate.

6. Three Commitments of Interpretation

Having sketched out the transformative view of Hegel's methodology, I have juxtaposed this view against the absolute criterion view placing an emphasis on how each view differs in the kind of project it sees Hegel as undertaking. This is a point of fundamental difference in both how we see the *Phenomenology* as an epistemological investigation and how we understand absolute knowing as its aim. Noting that the absolute criterion view takes Hegel's project to be an argument by elimination,³⁹ Hegel's project is cast as a process that is somewhat negative in its orientation: each shape of consciousness is dispensed with in virtue of its failure until we reach absolute knowing. The transformative view, in contrast, takes Hegel's project to be largely constructive in its orientation and that the failure of each shape of consciousness plays a positive role in the formation or *Bildung* of consciousness up to the "standpoint of science." This difference in orientation, however, is not merely a superficial issue of emphasis. In this section I will outline three commitments of the absolute criterion view that each reveal a countered position assumed by the transformative reading. Moreover, I will show that each of these three commitments will raise significant textual and philosophical problems for the absolute criterion view. Examining these

³⁹ Or at least the instances of it we have considered. While I do not maintain that the absolute criterion view *must* proceed with an argument by elimination, it does appear to be the central strategy. It is perhaps possible that one can think Hegel provides us with a criterion for identifying absolute knowing, but does not think the *Phenomenology* is an argument by elimination.

commitments will make a substantial case that the transformative view offers a more compelling grasp of Hegel's project and a promising approach to understanding some of the notoriously difficult transitions in the text.

Before looking at the text let me simply spell out these commitments. First, the absolute criterion view subscribes to what I call the "static" commitment relating to the absolute criterion being offered. For the absolute criterion in question to be able to single out absolute knowing it must not shift or change throughout the examination. In contrast, the transformative view takes whatever standard that may be employed to be dynamic in that it alters from one shape of consciousness to the next. The second commitment is the "elimination" commitment. We have already discussed the strategy of understanding Hegel's project as an argument by elimination, but this importantly provides an understanding of the transitions in the *Phenomenology* in which each shape of consciousness is evaluated and eliminated one after another. As I will show, the alternative developmental view I have proposed in which each failure marks an insight and progress—the *Bildung*—up to absolute knowing, will fare much better in accurately portraying what Hegel describes as the "experience" [*Erfahrung*] of consciousness in phenomenological transitions. Third, there is the "extrinsic" commitment of the absolute criterion. Since such a criterion is specified at the outset, it is a criterion of evaluation that is independent from and external to the shapes of consciousness being evaluated. Central to the transformative view, however, the method of evaluation is essentially internal—a matter of consciousness engaging in a self-evaluation—and, thus, the development towards absolute knowledge is essentially a matter of self-development progressing towards the full self-realization of knowing.

All three of the above commitments have been identified to some extent in our discussion so far and this is in part due to the connection between these commitments. While I have pulled

these apart for examination, they are really three aspects of one overarching understanding of Hegel's project and so it should not be surprising that the transformative view has an alternative explanation for each of these points. If we understand Hegel to proceed by way of an argument by elimination, then we also understand him to have a uniform measure of evaluation to allow him to do so, and a measure that is specified and settled at the outset. If we understand Hegel to pursue a genuinely transformative developmental process towards absolute knowing, then we ought not think he is deceptively holding onto some absolute criterion he is reluctant to disclose at the outset. The transformative view entails that there will be genuine alterations in our measure of evaluations and that these are really necessary to bring absolute knowing into view.

Taking each commitment in turn, we can begin with the static commitment. The absolute criterion view maintains that there is some overarching principle of evaluation which is static and unchanging throughout the progression towards absolute knowledge. Two main features of the text throw suspicion on this feature of the absolute criterion view. First is Hegel's description of his project as a path of "despair."

"Natural consciousness will prove to be only the concept of knowing, or it will prove to be not real knowing. But while it immediately regards itself rather as real knowing, this path has negative meaning for it, and what is the realization of this concept will count instead, to it, as the loss of itself, for on this path, it loses truth. This path can accordingly be regarded as the path of *doubt*, or, more properly, as the path of despair [*Weg der Verzweiflung*]; on this path, what happens is not what is customarily understood as doubt, a shaking of this or that supposed truth, followed by the disappearance again of the doubt, and then a return to the former truth so that in the end the thing at issue is taken as it was before." (Pinkard, p. 78, par. 52)

Seeing Hegel's project as employing a static criterion of adequacy, however thin or complex, would give us a stable sense of what we regard as "truth" and provide us with precisely the kind of assurance Hegel is quick to distance himself from: that of simply "shaking" off other kinds of "supposed truth" that do not align with the standard we are utilizing. In contrast, Hegel thinks

that his project is “more properly” described as a “path of despair.” The reason being that this process will involve the loss of what we regard to be “real knowing.” Holding onto some epistemological standard throughout this process would provide precisely the stability that Hegel thinks is not afforded to us in the *Phenomenology*. On the other hand, if we think of Hegel’s project as lacking a stable criterion to guide our process, then Hegel’s remarks make a great deal more sense. Hegel’s description seems to match up nicely with his project being cast as a process of challenging our very sense of justification and validity, a process in which we put our epistemological standards in jeopardy and are willing to let go of fundamental presuppositions about knowledge we might have. Taking his project to contain genuine and fundamental shifts in what we think knowledge is provides an accurate gloss on why Hegel is describing a path in which consciousness experiences a “loss of itself” and “loses truth.”

The second issue for the static commitment is its lack of explanation for the two-tiered structure of the *Phenomenology*. It is well known that one unique feature of the *Phenomenology* is that there is a developing consciousness, a protagonist, that assumes each shape of consciousness for the purposes of engaging in an “internal” evaluation and progresses through towards absolute knowing, while we the readers are a kind of phenomenological observer watching this process unfold. The reason for this division has to do with the kind of internal examination that Hegel thinks the *Phenomenology* will exemplify.

“But the nature of the object we are investigating goes beyond this division, or to this semblance of division and presupposition. Consciousness in its own self provides its own standard, and the investigation will thereby be a comparison of it with itself, for the difference which has just been made falls within consciousness.” (Pinkard p. 55, par. 84)

Hegel is clear that the investigation at hand is a matter of consciousness examining itself and that what is at issue is whether consciousness can meet its own standard. But this is not a matter of meeting a generic standard of logical “internal consistency.” Hegel is quite clear that he takes

this self-evaluation to be exactly that, with no external evaluation to alter the process. In discussing our inquiry into the distinction between the mere concept of knowledge and knowledge itself, Hegel says that “we thus do not have to bring standards with us and apply *our* ideas and thoughts during the investigation.” He continues:

“However, from this aspect not only will it be superfluous for us to add anything and not only because concept and object, the standard and what is to be examined, are present in consciousness itself. Rather, we are lifted above comparing the two and conducting a genuine *examination* such that, while consciousness examining its own self, the only thing that remains to us is purely to look on.” (Pinkard, p. 56, par. 85)

This is what leads us as readers to assume the position of being mere observers in this process. The developing consciousness that is undertaking this self-evaluation is doing all of the evaluative work and appealing to only the standard it gives to itself. Not only is this inconsistent with taking Hegel to be formulating a static and uniform criterion of evaluation at the outset, it also takes away the motivation for doing so. Hegel thinks that utilizing such a criterion would be “superfluous” to the kind of investigation he is pursuing, as the only relevant standard to this examination is already “present in consciousness itself.”

To understand the issues with the second commitment, what I call the elimination commitment, we need to see how Hegel expands on this notion of consciousness examining itself: what this entails and how it moves us from one shape of consciousness to the next. Let us first summarize how Hegel describes the internal evaluation we have mentioned numerous times. He says that knowing is a “comparison” of concept and object, or of a knowledge claim and its object. The latter element here, i.e., the object of knowledge, constitutes the standard of knowledge that one is attempting to meet in conceiving of the object in a certain way. Hegel tells us that “If in this comparison, the two do not correspond to one another, then it seems as if

consciousness must alter its knowing in order to make it adequate to the object.”⁴⁰ This certainly seems to capture a fairly common understanding of epistemology, that of bracketing our concern with truth and altering our conception of knowledge in order to assure ourselves that we really do grasp the world as we think it is. But Hegel points out that a form of knowledge--a given determinate account of what knowledge amounts to--contains a determination of what counts as knowledge, i.e. a standard of truth that it holds itself to. So altering our conception of knowledge, say from empiricism to rationalism or idealism, also involves an alteration in our conception of the kind of thing we must grasp in order to have knowledge, e.g. sensory impressions, Platonic forms, propositions etc.

“[T]he standard for the examination is altered when that for which it was supposed to be the standard itself fails the examination, and the examination is not only an examination of knowing but also an examination of the standard of knowing.” (Pinkard, p. 57, par. 85)

The internal evaluation and failure to meet this evaluation is a process in which our concept of knowledge and our concept of truth cannot be reconciled. For instance, we may come to see that empiricism fails to provide the means to grasp the sensory particulars it claims to, as in the section ‘Sense-certainty’ of the *Phenomenology*. This prompts us to reconsider the nature of the object we are really after, which has the result of altering both our conception of knowledge and our conception of the object of knowledge. What is altered is the subject-object pair, including what we take to be fundamental to reality itself.⁴¹

This radical upheaval in what we take to be fundamental to our sense of truth speaks to the path of despair we have already discussed, but with the elimination commitment our concern is with whether such a failure constitutes simply a *discarding* of that shape of consciousness and then

⁴⁰ Pinkard p. 57, par. 85

⁴¹ And it is worth noting that the "comparison" at issue can radically change as well. Hegel's language does not commit him to thinking of knowledge in terms of a correspondence between facts and mental states.

taking up a new shape for examination. On the absolute criterion view Hegel would proceed by undermining an exhaustive checklist of seemingly viable conceptions of knowledge and the insight gained from each elimination would be merely that those shapes of consciousness fall short of being genuine knowledge. However, Hegel seems to have a much richer conception of the result of these failures and how they present us with the next shape of consciousness.

“However, this is in fact also the same situation already discussed above concerning the relation of this exposition to skepticism, namely, that each and every result which emerges from a non-truthful knowing should not coalesce into an empty nothing, but rather must be necessarily grasped as the nothing of *that of which it is the result*, a result which contains the truth that the previous knowing has in itself.” (Pinkard p. 58, par. 87)

In contrast to the idea that we simply discard shapes of consciousness when they fail to meet their own standards, Hegel thinks this failure is the “experience” of consciousness that is productive in furnishing us with the “new object” of knowledge. This failure is supposed to reveal the “truth” of the shape of consciousness being considered and it is this truth that is the insight that will propel us forward in our examination.

“As a result, a new shape of consciousness comes on the scene for which the essence is something different from what was the essence for the preceding shape. It is this circumstance which guides the whole series of shapes of consciousness in their necessity.” (Pinkard, p. 58, par. 87)

“Through this necessity, this path to science is itself already *science*, and according to its content it is thereby the science of the *experience of consciousness*.” (Pinkard, p. 58, par. 88)

Hegel sees his project as driven by this operation of “determinate negation,” that the realization that some shape of consciousness is not genuine knowledge is also a positive realization about what genuine knowledge ought to be. While perhaps this kind of dynamic could be added onto an argument by elimination, it is surely not contained in that strategy of epistemological examination. In contrast, thinking of Hegel’s project as essentially developmental in nature finds this notion of

experience to be just as central to the *Phenomenology* as Hegel describes it. Each failure builds upon the last, presenting us with greater insight into what absolute knowing is.

The third commitment has to do with some elements of Hegel's project we have already mentioned and, in particular, fills out the idea that the succession of failures presents a necessary progression in which the "path to science is itself already science." We have seen that the absolute criterion view takes Hegel to do some significant work in the introduction. This is necessary because the strategy of proceeding by an argument by elimination requires that Hegel offers some substantial justification for the criterion he will use. A consequence of this is that the criterion at issue is formulated and justified prior to the consideration of the shapes of consciousness within the text.⁴² This is quite significant because it raises the issue about what holds Hegel's project together: what connects the various shapes of consciousness and places absolute knowing as the end point? For the absolute criterion view it is the absolute criterion that holds the project together as it gives the grounding standard by which the investigation proceeds and the various shapes of consciousness are related by way of being candidates that might be able to meet that standard. Moreover, the goal of Hegel's project on this view is that some conception of knowledge meets the grounding standard specified at the outset. This is why the third commitment is labeled the "extrinsic commitment:" it takes the grounding standard that gives shape to the entire investigation to be extrinsic to the shapes of consciousness within the *Phenomenology*. What we have already seen, however, is that Hegel is quick to emphasize that the entire progression towards absolute knowing—what holds the project together as a whole—is a process of self-realization. He states this in various ways: that "consciousness is examining itself," that in its experience it "learns about

⁴² This commitment is highlighted by a comment of Westphal's (1988; p. 184). In speaking about how rigorous and demanding Hegel's absolute criterion is, he questions whether absolute knowing even meets the standard Hegel specifies, revealing that Westphal certainly thinks of this criterion as quite independent from the progression contained within Hegel's project.

itself” and that its ultimate goal is to reach “the point at which knowing no longer needs to go beyond its own self, where knowing finds itself. . .”⁴³

Hegel’s concern to express how he sees his project as a demonstration of self-realization is most profoundly reflected in his reference to the self-determination of living things in the preface. He talks about consciousness achieving a “self-restoring sameness” [*wiederherstellende Gleichheit*]⁴⁴ and likens consciousness to an “embryo” that, in becoming a full adult, “has *made* itself into what it is *in itself*.”⁴⁵ While these comments can be difficult to sift through, the overall point is one we have sufficient preparation for: that the project of the *Phenomenology* is not one of finding the right shape of consciousness and applying some external standard to it, but one of consciousness bringing itself to its full realization. Surely one could attempt to brush off these remarks as mere metaphors and literary extravagances, but a more charitable reading would find some reason for Hegel’s consistent descriptions along these lines. And with the transformative view we have precisely the kind of understanding of Hegel’s project that can accommodate these remarks. Putting together a number of things Hegel says about his project that we have reviewed, his turn to the idea of an organic unity simply underscores the self-transformative and developmental process he thinks the *Phenomenology* exhibits.

7. The Promise of the Transformative View

I have argued that the absolute criterion view’s commitments run counter to the text in a number of ways and, moreover, I have shown how the transformative reading I advocate accounts for Hegel’s remarks about his own project in a way that is instructive. Hegel’s description of his

⁴³ Pinkard, p. 54, par. 80.

⁴⁴ Pinkard p. 12, par. 18.

⁴⁵ Pinkard, p. 14, par. 21, italics in the original.

own project, especially with respect to the three commitments we have reviewed, reveals the transformative view as a compelling grasp of how Hegel thinks of the *Phenomenology*: that it is a progression of the self-development of cognition, proceeding without a determinate criterion at the outset and advances by way of transformative shifts that constitute the self-correction of cognition all the way up to absolute knowing. Grasping Hegel's project correctly, however, is itself only the beginning of what we are after. Having this outlook on what Hegel sets out to do places us in a better position to understand the transitions within the text. In this last section I want to briefly outline some of the main takeaways from the transformative view in terms of how it guides our reading of the text and how we can anticipate the transformative view being particularly helpful in dealing with the more obscure shapes of consciousness.

First there are two negative points about what we should not expect to see or attempt to hoist upon the text. Given that we are not appealing to some overarching criterion of adequacy, we should be cautious not to evaluate shapes of consciousness against presuppositions we might have about what counts as a theory of knowledge. That is, if we are allowing for genuine transformations and alterations in what counts as reality, subject, objective, justification and the like, then we cannot be too quick to dismiss features of a given shape of consciousness that seems to stray from what we commonly understand by these concepts. In addition, we ought not put too much emphasis on considering each shape of consciousness in isolation. Not only are we supposed to see each "new object" to emerge from the previous one, but also Hegel is quite clear that, as observers, we must follow the line of development through the various shapes of consciousness up to absolute knowing.

Positively this means that we ought to draw our attention to the transitions between shapes of consciousness. There are a few reasons for this. First has to do with the above point

regarding the lack of a static and overarching measure of knowledge. If the standard of knowledge is to undergo this transformative process then we have to understand the failure and subsequent shape of consciousness in a highly contextualized fashion. Forgoing the appeal to a uniform measure of adequacy forces us to see the transitions as almost entirely motivated by the issues that arise within a specific shape of consciousness. The second point has to do with the self-development of the progression of the *Phenomenology*. Taking the failure of each shape of consciousness to be a failure to achieve a kind of “self-sameness” or a failure to “complete itself” we can only understand this sort of failure by looking to the commitments within each shape of consciousness. Each failure amounts to consciousness falling short of meeting its own standard and so such a failure can only be understood in terms of a failure of self-evaluation. In short, we need to “linger” [*verweilen*] at each stage, as Hegel instructs, and look to the shapes of consciousness and actual transitions, as it is the only way we can witness the *Bildung* of consciousness.

Lastly, the transitions are of particular concern because they are the moments of the informative “experience” of consciousness. They constitute the developmental steps towards absolute knowing, building upon each other until we reach absolute knowing as “essentially a result” of this series of experiences. Not only does each failure inform the subsequent shape of consciousness, these failures get us closer to reaching absolute knowing. One way to fill this idea out is to think about what an “appearance of knowledge” amounts to. Implicit in the absolute criterion view is the idea that an appearance of knowledge is a *mere* appearance of knowledge, nothing more than a false or incorrect conception of knowledge in contrast to absolute knowing which meets the absolute criterion in question and is the correct conception. With the developmental orientation of the transformative reading, appearances of knowledge are more

accurately described as inadequate or incomplete conceptions of knowledge, exercises of our capacity to know that lack clarity. Hegel often uses the word “pure” [*reine*] to describe our aim. He tells us that “pure self-knowing” [*reine Selbsterkennen*] is the “very ground and soil of science” and that this has its culmination in “transparency” [*Durchsichtigkeit*]. The progression towards absolute knowing is less a matter of identification or more a matter of refinement, a movement from a confused and disordered self-understanding of knowing to a clearer and pure position of self-consciousness. This being the case, we look to each shape of consciousness and its transition to the next shape of consciousness as a step towards this refinement and see the lessons contained therein.

Infinity and Desire: The Practical Turn of ‘Self-Consciousness’

Chapter 2

It is not difficult to find commentators that emphasize the significance of the transition from ‘Consciousness’ to ‘Self-Consciousness’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Robert Pippin says that it would be “hard to overestimate the importance” of the final section of ‘Consciousness’ that leads us to ‘Self-Consciousness.’¹ Axel Honneth remarks that “Hardly any of Hegel’s works have attracted as much attention as the chapter on ‘Self-Consciousness.’”² And Fred Neuhouser notes that this transition is “one of the *Phenomenology*’s most important turning points.”³ This transition attracts so much attention because of its abrupt turn away from concerns with theoretical knowledge in ‘Consciousness’ and move towards concerns with our practical orientation towards the world. Within a few pages, and with seemingly little preparation for the reader, Hegel famously claims that “self-consciousness is desire itself [*Begierde überhaupt*]” and that its immediate object is life, only to be followed by a turn to the topic of recognition and the famous “Master-Slave Dialectic.” Some authors have attempted to downplay this seemingly distinctive turn to the practical,⁴ but reflecting back on this chapter from the standpoint of Reason, Hegel’s remarks seem to thwart such an interpretive strategy.

¹ P. 131, Pippin, R. *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-consciousness*, Cambridge University Press (1989).

² P. 3, Honneth, A. ‘From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s Grounding of Self-Consciousness’ in *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*, Polity Press (2012).

³ P. 37, Neuhouser, F. ‘Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord’ in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Westphal eds. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing (2009).

⁴ John McDowell’s heterodox reading is a case in point, although it is surely not a dominant strategy in the literature. See ‘The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of “Lordship and Bondage in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*’ in his *Having the World in View*, Harvard University Press (2013).

“Formerly, [in ‘Self-Consciousness’] it [consciousness] did not understand the world; it desired it and worked on it, withdrew itself from it, took an inward turn back into itself away from it, and erased the world for itself and itself as consciousness, and it erased itself both as consciousness of it as the essence as well as consciousness of its nullity.” (Pinkard, p. 137, par. 232)

The contrast Hegel makes here between understanding the world, on the one hand, and desiring and working on the world, on the other, suggests rather strongly that Hegel does not mean to water-down his invocation of these practical topics. And this indicates, further, that any interpretation of the transition to ‘Self-Consciousness’ must make sense of how Hegel’s considerations of theoretical knowledge lead him to consider such practical orientations toward the world.

Not only does Hegel’s remark suggest that we ought not simply explain away his turn towards distinctively practical topics, but what we have said about the *Phenomenology* as an ambitious critical project also presents challenges for certain interpretive strategies at the outset. First, it seems highly unlikely Hegel is changing topics at this point in the text. This “two topic” strategy⁵ in which we take Hegel to be moving on from theoretical knowledge to practical knowledge would go against Hegel’s critical project in that it would not exemplify the phenomenological method in which a new object (or criterion) of knowledge emerges from the last.⁶ More to the point, such a shift in our overall topic of inquiry would import certain

⁵ While Pippin (2011) does not use this term, he does outline two versions of this kind of strategy. Noting the difficulty of finding a continuous line of thought from ‘Consciousness’ to ‘Self-Consciousness’ Pippin mentions that interpreters such as Alexander Kojève have read Hegel as moving onto an entirely new discussion in ‘Self-Consciousness’, almost omitting the inquiries of ‘Consciousness.’ A slightly different strategy is to see ‘Consciousness’ to prompt a change in topic. Here, while my interpretation is closer to the second strategy, I think such a strategy requires significant caveats and I am specifically warning against leaning on some underlying assumptions about the relation between practical and theoretical knowledge to account for this transition.

⁶ Of course, this two topic strategy is consistent with the absolute criterion view, as there is, strictly speaking, nothing that entails a specific connection between each shape of consciousness on that view. We could simply see Hegel as moving onto another conception of practical knowledge that is purported to be absolute knowledge. But one virtue of the absolute criterion view is that it keeps Hegel's epistemological ambitions front and center and does not see him as abandoning this for a study in social-political philosophy, for example. On the transformative view, however, we are committed to a developmental progression from consciousness to self-consciousness. This can be

presuppositions about the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge, precisely the kind of fundamental distinction that ought not be taken for granted in Hegel's project. Each shape of consciousness is a putative conception of genuine knowledge, a claim to what knowledge is in general. The distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge is quite sophisticated and certainly something that would *follow* from fundamental commitments of a philosophical conception of knowledge. This also warns against taking Hegel to be straightforwardly making a general claim about the primacy of practical knowledge. Considering the scope and aim of Hegel's project, it would seem that this would be at the very least misleading.⁷ If we are aiming at absolute knowledge, then it would seem that our concerns are with a conception of knowledge that would precede such distinctions. We should be careful to not view Hegel as working with a common (perhaps even contemporary) distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge and then endorsing one as fundamental, as it is likely the import of the shapes of consciousness in Self-Consciousness will be missed.

Noting that we should be weary of reading Hegel as making rather large assumptions about the relation between theoretical and practical knowledge in this transition, an alternative strategy presents itself. If Hegel is indeed placing the practical in a fundamental role in our conception of knowledge, then we ought to understand this as following from general considerations about absolute knowledge. That is, we can think that Hegel is not *assuming*

seen as a burden, but I will take it as an asset, directing us to pay careful attention to the final problematic of consciousness to see how the practical features of self-consciousness emerge.

⁷ One can think that practical knowledge is more fundamental than theoretical knowledge or vice-versa. But one may also think there is an overarching genus of knowledge in general and that there are practical and theoretical species. This is but a glimpse of the many ways one can think of this relation and Hegel's protagonist has not yet taken up much that would suggest a particular view is being adopted, at least not enough to provide the basis for a transition to a new shape of consciousness.

anything about the primacy of practical knowledge and instead understand absolute knowing as practical in a way that is sufficiently motivated by a failure to understand knowledge otherwise.⁸

There are two sources of guidance from what we have said about the transformative conception of Hegel's methodology that will aide us in tackling this influential moment in the *Phenomenology*. First is that shifts in our conception of knowledge leading to new shapes of consciousness arise out of the "experience" [*Erfahrung*] of consciousness learning the "untruth" [*Unwahrheit*] of the previous conception of knowledge. It is the failure of the previous conception that gives rise to a new object of knowledge, a new conception of absolute or genuine knowledge. To understand what self-consciousness amounts to and what motivates the turn to self-consciousness, we ought to look to the precise nature of the failure out of which it emerges. Second is that we have already seen a fairly thin sense in which knowledge has a practical structure. This is the developmental *Bildung* which is the path of the entire *Phenomenology*. The investigation of knowledge Hegel is pursuing is a "movement and coming-to-be" of absolute knowing and the self-development of knowledge towards the "standpoint of science." According to Hegel our investigation will reveal knowledge as self-determining "in pressing forward to its true existence."⁹ Thus, Hegel's characterization of the path of the *Phenomenology* as a whole suggests that the relevant sense in which we can expect knowledge to emerge as practical will have to do with its self-determination.¹⁰

⁸ Kojève (1969) represents an interpretation of the former strategy. In reference to this practical turn he states that "Action that arises from and because of Desire" is one of "two irreducible givens, which the *Phenomenology* presupposes as its *premises*." (p. 39)

⁹ Miller, (p. 56, par. 89).

¹⁰ The first point obviously speaks to my grievances with the elimination commitment of the absolute criterion view outlined in the last chapter. The second point has to do with the extrinsic commitment. As we will see, the idea of knowing unfolding in terms of a kind of self-development is a theme that Hegel will develop quite a bit in the passages discussed in both this and the subsequent chapters of the dissertation. But the end of the dissertation I hope to make clear that this is a feature of Hegel's project that is captured much more fully on the transformative view and serves to pull together a number of elements of 'Self-Consciousness.'

Consistent with these insights, my interpretation will proceed as follows. The first two sections focus on the failure of ‘Consciousness.’ Section 1 outlines the central and final problem of ‘Consciousness,’ namely, the problem of the inverted world. Section 2 considers the experience of this problem from the standpoint of consciousness and how this leads to the introduction of a new object of knowledge that Hegel initially labels as “infinity.”

[*Unendlichkeit*] I argue that this new object has a great deal of significance for the transition to self-consciousness and in section 3 I outline how infinity is the object of self-consciousness in the sense that consciousness aims to exhibit a self-relating structure that I refer to as “infinite self-determination.” In section 4 I connect this self-determining structure to the experience of self-awareness that Hegel thinks is constitutive of the orientation of self-consciousness and in section 5 I bring these insights to bear on Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness is “desire.” Desire, I argue, not only provides an implicit self-awareness, but it also refers to the drive to realize the “unity of self-consciousness” in the context of infinite self-determination. In section 6 I conclude by showing how the focus on infinity and desire provides for a novel interpretation of the practical turn of self-consciousness.

1. The Problem of the Inverted World

Self-consciousness emerges from the last shape of consciousness, the Understanding [*Der Verstand*].¹¹ In line with the transformative view that reads this text as developmental in nature, we are obligated to look to the failure of the Understanding that precedes self-consciousness in order to grasp where Hegel is going with the latter shape of consciousness. Indeed, given the rather surprising turn the text takes, this commitment seems fairly promising. Careful attention

¹¹ Throughout I will refer to this shape of consciousness as “the Understanding.” I am opting to capitalize this term to avoid confusion when the non-technical sense of “understanding” is being used.

will be paid to this failure, as Hegel's initial characterizations of self-consciousness ought to be articulated and motivated in light of it. In this section I want to briefly summarize the main problem that surfaces at the end of 'Force and the Understanding.' With an overview of this problem itself we will have the context required to see how this problem is experienced by the Understanding in sections 2 and 3. The crux of the problem is a pernicious divide that consciousness finds between the unity it seeks to explain phenomena, on the one hand, and the distinctions among these appearances, on the other. The shape of consciousness in 'Force and Understanding' can be understood as a kind of scientific realism, positing things like forces and natural laws to provide order to the manifest differences and changes among various phenomena. The problem of the inverted world presents these principles of unity as empty or abstract principles that are--from the viewpoint of the Understanding--unconnected to, and even incompatible with, the varying manifestations they are supposed to explain.

In 'Force and Understanding' our protagonist is after the unity necessary to have a determinate conception of the object of knowledge. This concern about the unity of the object of knowledge arises in 'Sense-Certainty' and continues through 'Perception' and the unity, at this point, is thought of as something that brings order to the world of appearances in general. With this shape of consciousness, which is referred to by Hegel as "the Understanding," knowledge amounts to grasping the underlying essence of objects--their metaphysical ground--which gives order to the appearances we apprehend immediately. As we have mentioned, the position at issue is akin to thinking of knowledge in terms of natural scientific explanation of a realist stripe. The position is that to have knowledge of some phenomenon is to be able to place that phenomenon under a general order and this amounts to positing theoretical entities that constitute the "truth" of the object "behind" its manifestations. During the course of 'Force and Understanding' Hegel

begins by considering force as such a metaphysical ground and then turning to natural laws. As our developing consciousness is in pursuit of the unity of objects as a genuine explanation of their manifestations, it is not content with a mere *description* of the way things appear. The observation *that* certain appearances occur is not enough to genuinely have knowledge of objects; instead, we are after *why* they appear as they do. Knowledge is conceived of as grasping the explanans that constitute what appearances really amount to.

We can briefly outline three aspects of what the Understanding thinks must be included in its conception of knowledge that reveal its position is untenable. First is that it is after a strictly non-empirical basis of the object of knowledge. Up to this point in ‘Consciousness’ it has been shown that a manifold of sensory impressions, the mere appearance of objects itself, fails to provide the unity necessary to have empirical knowledge. This can be understood as a broadly Kantian point: that a manifold of appearance must be brought under a principle of order in order to be intelligible. Since this unity is supposed to order appearances, the principle of unity sought cannot itself be an appearance. Thus, the Understanding is committed to the idea that only non-empirical explanans will suffice. Second is that we are seeking empirical knowledge, or knowledge of empirical objects. The Understanding is not throwing empirical objects to the side and putting its sites on a new, non-empirical object, at least not intentionally. The explanandum is empirical objects in general and whatever non-empirical sources of unity are posited are aimed at grasping the essence of empirical objects. Third, the Understanding has a realist commitment that the only kind of ground which will offer a genuine grasp of empirical phenomena is a mind-independent, metaphysical ground. Forces and laws are posited as such metaphysical entities that are thought to ground appearances.

To articulate the problem that arises we should first turn to some of Hegel's terminology. Since we are after empirical knowledge, or are maintaining that to have genuine knowledge is to have empirical knowledge, we are concerned to grasp the world as it appears to us, or what Hegel calls the "sensible world" [*sinnliche Welt*]. The sensible world constitutes the explanandum at issue. The non-empirical basis that we think must constitute the explanans of the sensible world, is what Hegel calls the "supersensible world" [*übersinnliche Welt*]. The first cause for concern is when we put these two aspects of our conception of knowledge together. We seem to be advancing a view in which to have empirical knowledge requires positing some non-empirical entity (or realm of entities), or, in Hegel's terms, to know the sensible world requires grasping the supersensible world. Our conception of knowledge is pushing us toward maintaining the position that to have knowledge of one thing, empirical reality, is really to posit something else entirely, namely, a non-empirical reality. But the worry is not that we are shifting our focus to a new kind of non-empirical object; it is that this new metaphysical ground we are after is characterized as being in direct opposition to empirical reality. One can easily produce many different ways to articulate this opposition, many of which Hegel makes use of: appearance is that which is manifest, essence is that which is not manifest; appearances are a plurality while essences are a unity; the appearance of an object is the "outer" of the object while its essence constitutes its "inner."¹² And this opposition is something that is self-imposed, a feature of the "internal" stance of this shape of consciousness. That is, it is the Understanding which stipulates that only a non-empirical ground is sufficient, characterizing this ground only in terms of what appearances themselves lack.

¹² To anticipate where we are going, I will state that Hegel is most concerned with this opposition in terms of "unity and difference" before moving on from this problematic. As far as I can see, Hegel does not give an explicit argument for this and the different characterizations of this opposition do not necessarily exclude the others.

As we consider the above stipulations it begins to look as though our developing consciousness is painting itself into a corner. On the one hand, the position is that to have knowledge requires being able to do more than merely describe some phenomenon. To know requires positing the underlying metaphysical ground that genuinely explains what that phenomenon is. On the other hand, this metaphysical ground is thought to be in direct opposition to appearances. Since our developing consciousness takes appearances to require some further element above and beyond appearances themselves to be intelligible, it is committed to positing some entity or reality that does not itself appear to us, a supersensible world. This position, then, culminates in the dilemma that either these non-empirical forces and laws are unconnected to the phenomena they are supposed to explain, or they constitute merely another description of phenomena and not a genuine explanation.¹³ If we maintain that there are transcendent entities-- laws or forces--that really do constitute the reality of appearances, then it is difficult to see how this helps us know empirical objects. The problem with the first horn of the dilemma is that we have stipulated that such laws and forces are not manifest and in opposition to appearances according to the characterization we are able to give them. The supersensible--if it is that which gives order to the sensible--must do so while being precisely that which appearances themselves lack. So it is not clear how positing a supersensible world will help us to understand the sensible world, as the supersensible is, as far as we can see, completely different from the sensible world. The other horn of the dilemma is that if the essence of objects--the supersensible world that gives order to the sensible world--is itself not altogether different and opposed to the sensible, then we lack the explanation of the sensible reality we are after. The Understanding has stipulated that we

¹³ Robert Pippin puts this dilemma rather succinctly: "Either some transcendence of the manifold of appearances occurs and laws of genuine universality and necessity are achieved, in which case the explanatory connection between such laws and the empirically apprehended manifold is hard to make out; or there is no such transcendence and so no real explanation of appearances." (1989, p. 137)

must posit the non-manifest in order to grasp that which is manifest and so positing another form of appearance or a different kind of manifestation does not help us solve the problem of how to grasp a manifold of appearances in general.

Hegel refers to the issue at hand as one of *inverting* the sensible world into a supersensible world, a strategy that is not helpful as it fails to draw us closer to understanding the sensible world.¹⁴ The overall point can be, I think, put in the following way: positing another kind of entity or principle does not help us understand what objects are in general. We are merely shifting the problem and, since we are shifting to a metaphysical ground that is non-empirical and in opposition to our original empirical object, the shift we make is an inversion of our original object.

In the next section we will see just how the Understanding experiences its failed attempt to make progress in coming to a determinate object of knowledge, but it is worth noting the relevant features of this opposition between the supersensible and the sensible worlds that Hegel takes up and focuses on moving forward. There are many different kinds of distinction that one can see at play in our concern to explain observable phenomena: the manifest and unmanifest, appearance and reality, theoretical and empirical, etc., but Hegel focuses especially on the distinction between unity and difference both at the end of ‘Force and the Understanding’ and in ‘Self-Consciousness.’ I will follow him on this point. The non-empirical forces and laws we are concerned with are posited as sources of *unity* and are seen as being in opposition to the manifold of *differences* that they are supposed to unify. The issue of inversion stems from the former being empty principles of unity, or abstractions of unity “that differences cannot come

¹⁴ Hegel uses the term “*verkehrte*” to refer to what is sometimes translated as the “topsy-turvy inversion” from one world to the next.

out of.”¹⁵ The unifying principles that the Understanding takes to be necessary to having genuine knowledge reveal themselves to be incompatible with the distinctions among appearances. While this problem is originally connected to the somewhat natural scientific outlook of the Understanding, the problem of the inverted world points to a general problem that sometimes answers to the label of the problem of “the one and the many.” Forces and laws serve as proposed universal sources of unity, an attempt to bring all phenomena under a common order, and the general problem at issue is how we are to understand differences, variation and change, in our experience to relate to a universal unifying order at all. The scope of this issue is difficult to overstate and at this point in the text our protagonist sees the task of grasping the notions of unity and difference as its main obstacle.

2. Infinity

As we have identified in the last chapter, on the transformative reading, transitions in the *Phenomenology* are prompted by an informative failure—the experience of consciousness—that gives rise to a new shape of consciousness. The problem of the inverted world is surely an instance of such a failure and it is informative in that it reveals an implicit demand on the part of our protagonist to unify or order whatever distinctions that are presented and demonstrates that such distinctions seem to be immanent in the very attempt to unify them. The emergence of such distinctions is particularly evident in the pernicious divide that arises between the sensible and supersensible worlds being either in opposition to each other or indifferent to one another, an opposition that arises out of the Understanding’s attempt to unify phenomena. Surprisingly, out

¹⁵ Pinkard, p. 99, par. 162.

of this seemingly puzzling obstacle Hegel sees the seeds of the self-determination of thought, what he calls “infinity” [*Unendlichkeit*].

“Appearance, or the play of forces, already exhibits infinity itself, but infinity first freely emerges as *explanation*. As infinity is finally an object for consciousness, and consciousness is aware of it *as what it is*, then consciousness is *self-consciousness*.”
(Pinkard, p. 99, par. 163)

Not only does infinity signal something of a linchpin, connecting the problem of the inverted world to self-consciousness, it also provides an indispensable feature of Hegel’s thought, moving us much closer to self-determining Spirit. In his later writings Hegel is quite clear that he thinks of infinity as “the basic concept of philosophy” and the “nature of speculative thought displayed in its determining feature.”¹⁶ These claims are both bold and rich in their own right and a thorough explanation of them would take us far of course.¹⁷ Our concern here is to articulate enough of Hegel’s concept of infinity to see both how the infinite, as Hegel is using this term, is exhibited in explanation and the problem of the inverted world, and what role the infinite has in the transformation to self-consciousness.

In order to begin to get a handle on how “infinity” emerges out of explanation we should remember that explanation has brought us to the problem of the inverted world and consider this problem in terms of our protagonist’s experience. While we have articulated what the problem is, Hegel describes its presentation to our protagonist slightly differently. Shortly after making the above claim, Hegel recounts the difficulties our protagonist finds with attempting to arrive at the desired explanation of appearances.

“The *explanation* provided by the understanding at first constitutes only the description of what self-consciousness is. The understanding sublates the differences [*Unterschiede*]

¹⁶ *Science of Logic*, George Di Giovanni Trans. Cambridge University Press (2010), p. 122, 21:139.

¹⁷ A helpful and more detailed analysis focusing primarily on Hegel’s conception of “true infinity” (what I will call “genuine infinity”) can be found in Alper Türken’s ‘Hegel’s Concept of the True Infinite and the Idea of a Post-Critical Metaphysics’ in Allegra de Laurentiis eds. *Hegel and Metaphysics: On Logic and Ontology in the System*, De Gruyter Publishing (2016).

already present in the law, differences that have already become pure differences but which are still indifferent differences, and it posits them as existing within a unity, that of force. However, this coming-to-be-equal is likewise immediately an estrangement, for it is only as a result of that estrangement that the understanding sublates the differences and posits the One of force by means of making a new difference between force and law, but which is at the same time no difference at all.” (ibid)¹⁸

The experience of our protagonist from the standpoint of the Understanding is, in short, that each attempt to posit a unity and bring order to appearances actually gives rise to new distinctions.¹⁹

Grasping appearances as the manifestations of forces is intended to provide a common order among the distinctions between various events, but it gives rise to a distinction between forces and their manifestations. To account for the relation between forces and their manifestations the Understanding posits laws which only gives rise to yet another distinction between laws and the phenomena they govern. What the protagonist experiences, then, is an endless task of giving order to phenomena, only to result in the rendering of a new distinction to order.²⁰²¹

At this point Hegel’s use of “infinity” may seem somewhat appropriate. Intuitively, we may describe the understanding’s task as infinite in the sense that it is without end, but it is clear that this cannot exhaust what Hegel means by this term. The first indication of this is the reference to self-consciousness. It is certainly not clear, given our description thus far, that the endless task of the Understanding would give rise to a self-relation at all. The second, and perhaps more pressing issue, is the flurry of rather unusual descriptions of infinity as a principle of identity. He describes infinity as “self-sameness” [*Selbstgleich*]²² in which distinctions are

¹⁸ Pinkard’s use of the capitalized “One” in his translation of “the One of force” [*das Eins der Kraft*] is a stylistic move that does not denote a technical usage of “one” by Hegel.

¹⁹ Here I am opting to treat *Unterschiede* as “distinctions” rather than “differences.”

²⁰ The two horns of the dilemma, we may recall, provide two different unpalatable results that can be identified each time our protagonist posits some principle of unity.

²¹ As we will see in the next two chapters, this is a theme Hegel returns to in different forms. The initial object of self-consciousness, life, results in the experience of an endless cycle of desires and with skepticism we see the endless task of demonstrating that there is no substance to the distinction between the true and the false.

²² While it is difficult to find an English equivalent here, I find “self-sameness” preferable to Pinkard translation as “self-equality” and Inwood’s as “like-itself.”

“immediately sublated,” “a *distinguishing of what is not distinct*.”²³ And he goes on to claim that infinity is “omnipresent, neither dulled nor interrupted by any difference, which is instead itself both every difference as well as their sublatedness.”²⁴ Noting these phrases, which surely bring to mind the issue of identity and difference as it occupied much of German Idealism after Kant, we have good reason to think that Hegel’s sense of infinity extends beyond the notion of a progression without end.

Central to Hegel’s system is his unique idea of “genuine” or “true” infinity, which can be distinguished from what he calls “negative infinity.”²⁵ Presumably the rather odd descriptions of infinity above coincide with the former, more specialized, notion of infinity. In order to see this distinction more clearly, we ought to look to the places where Hegel articulates his conception of infinity with the greatest clarity, namely, the *Encyclopedia Logic* and the *Science of Logic*. Those works can be described as largely concerned with the nature of conceptual thought and Hegel sees infinity as essential to grasping what he calls “speculative” thinking, or thinking from the standpoint of science, which is the aim of the entirety of the *Phenomenology*. In the *Encyclopedia* Hegel considers what he calls “*spurious or negative* infinity, since it is nothing but the negation of the finite.”²⁶ This negative notion of infinity is simply the attribute of a lack of limit or end. The shortcomings of this merely negative conception of infinity ought to be familiar from discussions in the Medieval and Moderns periods with respect to characterizations of God. In positing a truly infinite being, it would be counterproductive to think of that being’s existence characterized essentially as a *lack* of something, even if it is a lack of limitations. In contrast, one

²³ P. 100, par. 164.

²⁴ P. 98, par. 162.

²⁵ Many scholars have made note of this to varying degrees. Some relevant contemporary discussions of Hegel’s concept of true infinity can be found in Hortsmann (2006), Yeomans (2012), Davis (2012), Pippin (2019) and Türken (2015 and 2016).

²⁶ *Encyclopedia Logic*, Geraets, Suchting and Harris Trans. Hackett Publishing (1991; sec. 94; pp. 149).

might think infinity ought to be understood positively as a concept, which, for Hegel, is what he calls “genuine infinity.” This conception of infinity is not the mere lack of limitation or something incompatible with limitation, but the activity of overcoming of limits. Genuine infinity, for Hegel, cannot be simply that which lacks finitude; rather it must somehow contain and preserve reference to the finite. This position is motivated by a contradiction Hegel notices in thinking of the infinite as negative infinity. Taking the infinite to be defined negatively as the absence of finitude or limitations is to place it in opposition to the finite. To track the development of this concept as it occurs in Hegel’s *Logic*, this is the initial relation between the finite and negative infinity, in which these two notions are thought of as mutually incompatible. This dualism entails a contradiction because our grasp of infinity as limitless reveals it as lacking limitation and finitude, and this lack presents us with some kind of limitation, i.e., that the infinite cannot be finite. Thus, Hegel claims that in this dualism we have merely “two finites.” This prompts a revision in our conception of the infinite and its relation to the finite, a “negation of negation” or the positing of the infinite that does not admit of the aforementioned pernicious divide.

The genuine infinite is supposed to fit this bill of revealing a relation between the infinite and the finite in which neither completely excludes the other and both are preserved. It allows for limitations to have a positive role to play in grasping what the infinite is. Hegel’s formulations of what genuine infinity is are particularly difficult, but it is clear that he takes infinity to consist in a movement of self-relating activity. For instance, in discussing the relation between infinity and “its other,” the finite, he claims that “in its passing into another, something only comes together *with itself*; and this relation to itself in the passing and in the other is *genuine Infinity*.”²⁷ In

²⁷ *Encyclopedia Logic*, addition, sec. 95, pp. 150-1.

Hegel's language this means genuine infinity consists in "sublating" the distinction between itself and the finite. Andrew Davis provides an interesting and helpful formulation, that "it is a finite thing's own activity of self-sublation that reveals the infinite."²⁸ While this concise formulation does not explain away the rather elusive term "sublation," it does steer us towards a clearer sense of what Hegel is after. Suggesting that genuine infinity emerges out of the self-relating activity of finite beings--presumably to overcome or transcend their limitations--brings into view examples of such beings or entities that, for Hegel, exhibit this kind of self-organization, such as life, spirit, nature and the self. Of these, the most intuitive example, perhaps, is life (to anticipate the first object of self-consciousness). A living thing, which is surely finite and determinate, engages in activities that involve overcoming its determinations and the distinctions between itself and its "other." For instance, in consuming and metabolizing food a living thing actually takes in some bit of its environment, bits of what it is not, and makes them part of itself. This is a case of sublating or overcoming the distinction between itself and other. And this process in no way diminishes its determinacy or independence from its environment. Quite the opposite. This process of "passing into another" reaffirms and bolsters its determinacy as a living thing.

3. Infinity as the Object of Consciousness

While we have in hand a sketch of what Hegel thinks about infinity, we have yet to see what it means for infinity to emerge as "an object for consciousness" and for "consciousness to be aware of it as what it is." There are two central aspects to infinity being the object of consciousness,

²⁸A. Davis, 'Hegel's Idealism: the Infinite as Self-Relation' in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 179-194 (2012) (p. 182).

both of which are greatly aided by recognizing the developmental nature of this transition as building upon the previous concerns that occupy ‘Force and Understanding.’ The first aspect is something that Hegel expands upon in ‘Self-Consciousness’ and, accordingly, I give it more attention in the next chapter, but it is helpful to consider it here in brief. Anticipating that the immediate object of self-consciousness is life, something that exhibits the self-relating structure of infinity for Hegel, we need to say something about what it means for life to replace natural laws as the underlying principle of reality in general. The second aspect, however, is slightly more complicated. Taking infinity as its object, Hegel thinks consciousness takes on an essential reflective character, that consciousness of an object is “necessarily self-consciousness.”²⁹ Explanation, I maintain, exhibits the structure of infinity in that it reveals consciousness reinterpreting the distinction between subject and object. This distinction is among the differences that are intertwined with their unity according to the structure of infinity and thereby the subject exhibits this self-determining structure as much as its object.

With our preliminary sketch of Hegel’s notion of infinity we need a more determinate sense of what it means for infinity to be our new object and an overarching principle of determinacy. As we have seen, Hegel has a fairly specialized conception of infinity, although it should be clear that it is not without motivation. Nonetheless, it can be difficult to see genuine infinity in an intuitive fashion and in order to see this self-determining structure more clearly, I have mentioned some examples of objects that Hegel thinks exhibit this structure. Perhaps the most helpful, and the one Hegel takes up at the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness,’ is life.

Anticipating this move, the transformative reading provides a helpful insight reminding us that Hegel sees his transitions as developmental in nature, advancing our previous discussion. In

²⁹ Pinkard, p. 100, par. 164.

considering forces and laws we are concerned to articulate the fundamental principles that govern nature in general, so, at a minimum, we can expect life to maintain the same register of a universal principle thought to ground nature as a whole.

“This simple infinity, or the absolute concept, is to be called the simple essence of life, the soul of the world, the universal bloodstream, which is omnipresent, neither dulled nor interrupted by any difference, which is instead both every difference as well as their sublatedness.” (Pinkard, p. 98, par. 162)

This is among the more surprising and difficult passages in the *Phenomenology*, but we are in a position to make out some of the most salient components. Hegel connects infinity to life, as we ought to suspect, but in addition he emphasizes the pervasive and fundamental nature of infinity: that it is “universal” and “omnipresent,” the “soul of the world.” The main point to orient us to what Hegel has in mind is to understand life as replacing natural laws as the main principle organizing reality. To fill this out, we can note that one need not think of the world as primarily organized according to natural laws in a mechanistic or Newtonian fashion. Instead, one may take a more Aristotelian route and see the world as primarily divided into animate and inanimate objects, wherein the activities of living things serve to provide the primary source of organization for nature. Nature (including inanimate objects) is then thought to be divided and organized according to the various self-determining functions of living things, e.g., consumption, shelter, etc. So with infinity becoming the object of consciousness—and in the context of ‘Force and Understanding’—we can understand a shift in worldview, as it were, and this shift draws focus to the structure of self-determination exhibited in the activities of living beings as opposed to natural laws.³⁰

³⁰ Although there are certainly differences of interpretation on Hegel’s exact stance on this issue, Frederick Beiser (2005) makes note of this as a general philosophical position of Hegel extending to his more mature works, which Beiser labels Hegel’s “organic worldview.”

The above gloss gives us a preliminary idea of what it means for infinity to be an object for consciousness, but it is only an outline of how infinity is the object in the subject-object relation. The second aspect of the emergence of infinity is how it results in a reflective relation-- that this new worldview entails a relation of consciousness to itself. This brings us back to the issue of explanation. We will recall that, according to its experience, what consciousness actually finds in positing a unity “behind” appearances is further distinctions that emerge, and, thus it encounters more demands to bring unity to these further distinctions, demands which are prompted by its own activity of positing.

“It is just for that reason that there is so much self-satisfaction in explanation, because the consciousness involved in it is, to put it this way, in an immediate conversation with itself, enjoying only itself. While it undeniably seems to be pursuing something else, it is really just consorting with itself.” (Pinkard p. 100, par. 163)

Simply the fact that we are considering the activity of positing forces and laws reveals that we have to see the subject as taking an active role in knowing, but here Hegel seems to be indicating a much more robust self-relation at work in explanation. Initially, one may see in this quote a skeptical challenge outlining the main failure of the Understanding: that the problem of the inverted world reveals the purported subject-object relation being pursued is really just a relation of the subject to itself. But as we have seen, the transformative view sees such a seemingly devastating objection as prompting an instance of “determinate negation,” a failure that gives rise to a new object of knowledge in the developmental process towards absolute knowing. In light of this, I maintain that the self-relating activity of explanation that Hegel refers to here actually gives rise to the self-determining structure of infinity and offers a substantial revision of how consciousness thinks of the relation between subject and object.

Before moving forward, we should note that Hegel’s claim above comes with an important caveat. While Hegel says that consciousness is “enjoying *only* itself” at this juncture,

this is likely a merely stylistic phrase that does not indicate an endorsement of anything like a solipsistic position. Very quickly (in the next paragraph) Hegel gives a more tempered and technical formulation of the above thought that explicitly makes reference to an object, or an “other”: “consciousness of an other, of an object as such, is indeed itself necessarily *self-consciousness*.”³¹ And these formulations continue in the opening pages of ‘Self-Consciousness’ where he tells us that self-consciousness is a “return from out of *otherness*” and reminds us that the object is still present as “the object of sensuous-certainty and perception.”³² So in explanation we ought to expect, not that we rid ourselves of the object, but that a constitutive self-relation emerges in the relation between subject and object.³³

Turning to this relation of consciousness to itself, not only should our reading be informed by different formulations Hegel gives of self-consciousness as a relation to an object, but our reading should be informed by the notion of genuine infinity: the dynamic of self-determination in which limitations or divisions are integrated into a certain self-relating activity. This allows us to anticipate that the self-relation that is likely to emerge here is not one that simply *excludes* any sense of otherness. Indeed, Hegel thinks that with explanation we have a “description” of self-consciousness on hand. Barring for the moment the above claim that in explanation consciousness is “really just consorting with itself” we can take note of a less controversial way in which explanation has a kind of self-reference for the subject pursuing an explanation. In the explanation sought by the Understanding we recognize that the positing activity of consciousness evinces a negotiation of subject and object. The variations and

³¹ Pinkard, p. 100, par. 164. Emphasis in original text.

³² Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167. Emphasis in original text.

³³ As we will see there is a great deal more conceptual weight to this caveat. We can already see this in the idea of infinity as a dynamic of overcoming limitations, but also life and desire, to anticipate another key concept both are self-referring orientations towards an object.

alterations of observed phenomena are distinguished from the laws or forces posited by consciousness to explain the former. One might see explanation as positing the governing principles that tell us what objects really are in themselves and explain why we observe the phenomena we do. Thus, we can represent the explanandum as the subjective element of what is experienced empirically, which stands in need of the explanans to provide their objective grounding.³⁴ For the Understanding, explanation is self-referring in that it involves a negotiation of subjective and objective elements, a division that is implicit in the act of positing forces and laws. In explanation consciousness is parsing these elements out and attempting to relate them.

While this implicit self-reference of explanation begins to bring into view something like the self-relation of infinity, the connection between explanation and infinity needs to be made more explicit. Before we noted that while this relation between the empirical and non-empirical can answer to a number of different descriptions which may also characterize this relation differently, e.g., manifest and non-manifest, appearance and essence, etc., I claimed that Hegel is most concerned with this relation cast as a relation between difference and unity. In explanation, forces and laws are supposed to bring unity to the various differences we see in the world. With infinity we can map this relation onto the notions of finitude and the infinite. Since infinity (at least negative infinity) can be thought of as a lack of limitation, it would seem that infinity marks some notion of unity, a lack of division; whereas the finite represents the differences that separate things into distinct phenomena. With explanation and the problem of the inverted world we can see that the notion of unity—the conception of laws and forces as abstract principles—corresponds to the notion of negative infinity, an understanding of unity that is merely the lack of

³⁴ Of course, one could reverse these labels. Someone sympathetic with Hume, for instance, might think it is the laws and forces being posited that are really “subjective” and that our immediate experiences are what are really “objective” in a relevant sense. Nonetheless, this view still admits of the separation between what is taken to be subjective and objective elements in cognition.

differences. The understanding posits unity as that which lacks distinctions or limits, causing it to get caught up in perpetuating an opposition between these two elements. From this standpoint, consciousness is not yet aware of infinity “*as what it is,*” i.e., infinity as genuine infinity.

We are now in a position to see how the problem of the inverted world serves to make explicit for consciousness its relation to itself and bring into view genuine infinity as its new object. In recognizing that the problem of the inverted world is a result of the positing activity of the Understanding itself, the pernicious divide at issue is also recognized as dependent upon the Understanding itself. The division between unity and distinctions is a limitation on the Understanding that is *self-imposed*, indicating that Hegel’s remark about consciousness “enjoying only itself” in explanation itself suggests a solution. If consciousness is itself responsible for its limitations and the manner in which it negotiates the subjective and objective elements of cognition, then we already have an instance of the structure of genuine infinity: consciousness exhibiting a kind of self-determination in dividing itself from its object. Consciousness is exhibiting the very structure that, by its own lights, would allow it to have a viable conception of difference in general and therefore a viable conception of reality. Making explicit its own self-relation shapes how consciousness conceives of the relation between subject and object more generally. This is why Hegel claims that explanation constitutes a “description of what self-consciousness is” and that when consciousness is aware of infinity “*as what it is,* then consciousness is *self-consciousness.*” Thinking about reality as exhibiting the structure of infinity is to see distinctions and unity as intertwined and not mutually exclusive. As Hegel puts it, infinity concerns the “distinction in general,” i.e., what a distinction amounts to at all. So in explanation, if consciousness is positing a distinction between the explanans and explanandum—the way objects are in themselves and the way they appear to us—then that division

is now thought to exhibit infinity in which its unity is immanent within it. The shift to viewing the object of knowledge as infinity, then, reveals the subject-object distinction as also exhibiting infinity and, thus, consciousness can no longer think of knowledge as only preoccupied with an object, as it must think of knowledge as a unity of subject and object. With genuine infinity we are forced to consider the subject-object relation as a whole, implying that the relation of consciousness to its object is at the same time a relation to itself.

The transition to self-consciousness as our new shape of consciousness is a shift in how the subject-object relation is conceived and so it is a simultaneous shift in both the operative conception of subjectivity and reality and a shift that is promoted by a kind of self-correction. As such, this transition is rather sweeping in its scope and so it is worth taking another moment to describe it. Explanation can be understood as exhibiting the structure of genuine infinity in the sense that explanation as a whole is a unified phenomenon, yet a unity that can only be grasped via the division between explanandum and explanans. These elements must be held apart in order to achieve a genuine explanation in which the explanans provide independent grounds for the explanandum. In somewhat oversimplified terms, what we see in the problem of the inverted world is an issue with conceiving of the explanans and explanandum as divorced from one another and losing sight of their role in explanation as a whole. Considering explanation as an instance of knowledge, we can see this same kind of error in how we understand subjectivity. Knowing involves—keeping things in a very abstract sense—the overcoming of a subject-object divide, a divide between how things appear to us and what things are in themselves. But in considering this divide, we need not think of a metaphysical gap between, say, a Cartesian subject and a robustly mind-independent reality. With a conception of knowledge that maintains a sense of subjectivity that is seemingly incompatible with the object of knowledge—in which

there is what looks to be an insurmountable gap between subject and object—one may be inclined to think that a pernicious abstraction has caused the issue, that an error in reasoning is forcing a divide that otherwise would not be there. On such a view, one thinks there is certainly a relation between subject and object, but a relation that has been obscured. These relata are simply being related *poorly* or in an *impoverished* way. But the move to revise this problematic conception of subjectivity in this context, in which the revision places subject and object as aspects of a unity, reveals both relata as sharing a common principle. In the context of the Understanding, the principle at issue is one of determinacy in general. Given the broad scope at issue—one that certainly meets an ambition like articulating “absolute knowing”—the result of this self-correction in our conception of subjectivity entails rather sweeping claims about the organizing principle of reality and how the subject relates itself to that reality.

The self-correction of consciousness also leads us to see what we might call a “critical dimension” of the self-other relation in which the “other” of genuine knowledge is a mere appearance of knowledge, or other purported epistemological relations between subject and object, which are untrue. The entire project of the *Phenomenology* involves drawing a distinction between genuine knowledge and mere appearances of knowledge and reaching the standpoint of absolute knowing as informed by a comprehension of what is not absolute knowing.

Investigating knowledge in order to know what knowledge really is means that our capacity for knowledge will be responsible for distinguishing itself as genuine knowledge from mere appearances of itself. In the preface Hegel speaks of our task as one of knowledge establishing its identity or self-sameness.

“For something to be known falsely means that knowing is unequal to its substance. Yet this very inequality is the act of differentiating per se, the essential moment. It is indeed

out of this differentiation that its equality comes to be, and this equality, which has come to be, is truth.” (Pinkard, p. 24, par. 39)³⁵

Genuine infinity, then, also applies to the developmental process towards absolute knowing in that the overall task is the self-realization of knowledge which is achieved by way of its relation to another, namely mere appearances of knowledge. Looking to Hegel’s methodology, we see that the entire developmental process, the *Bildung* of consciousness, is a process of overcoming limitations in the transitions that are supposed to lead us to absolute knowing. Each transition is marked by a failure, the experience of running up against a limitation imposed by a shape of consciousness on itself and through the transformative process we have outlined in chapter 1, this limitation is transcended in its “sublation” and the movement to a new shape of consciousness. With the emergence of infinity we are drawing closer to seeing the self-determination of knowledge, which we should expect to unfold in the development towards absolute knowing. But we have only considered this infinite self-determination as it appears initially and we are not given so much of an answer as to what absolute knowing is as we are given clearer insight into our original task: that of grasping the development of consciousness in its ability to determine itself as true knowledge and set itself apart from false claims of knowledge.

4. Self-Consciousness

Although still remaining at a somewhat formal level of description, the path forward is implicit in the activity of explanation and we have an initial sense of the self-relation that is constitutive of this new relation to the object of infinity. The problem of the inverted world was revealed to

³⁵ Pinkard’s use of “equality” and “inequality,” while surely less awkward than “self-sameness,” strikes me as having a much too narrow connotation than Hegel’s use of *Gleichheit* and *Ungleichheit* in this context.

our protagonist as self-imposed and the path forward is to adopt the infinite self-determination that emerged out of explanation in which consciousness can overcome its limitations. But the concern with infinite self-determination still leaves us with the task of filling out this implicit self-reference into something that can more intuitively answer to the label of “self-consciousness.” At the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness’ we begin to get a clearer sense of what this new conception of knowledge amounts to, i.e., “*what consciousness knows while knowing itself.*” [*was das Bewußtsein weiß, indem es sich selbst weiß*]³⁶ Prior to Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness is desire *überhaupt* we are given some key descriptions of this new understanding of knowledge, expanding largely on the previously mentioned unity of subject and object that exhibits infinite self-determination. These descriptions, I will argue, are developments of what we have already seen to some degree in Hegel’s claim that consciousness of an object is “necessarily self-consciousness.” Our new shape of consciousness maintains that knowing an object is at the same time an awareness of oneself. This exhibits a unity, that of the subject with itself, that is also a division between subject and object. Taking note of how Hegel is thinking about self-consciousness will sharpen our understanding of the self-determination of self-consciousness and begin to prepare us for the topics that arise throughout ‘Self-Consciousness.’

Perhaps the first most significant characterization of self-consciousness that Hegel offers, with respect to how this new shape of consciousness differs from the last is the following:

“However, what has now emerged is something which did not happen in these previous relationships, namely, a certainty that is the same as its truth, for certainty is, to itself, its object, and consciousness is, to itself, the true.” (Pinkard, p. 102, par. 166)

Before offering my reading of this passage it will serve to clear away a potential misreading of Hegel’s claim. At a glance one might be inclined to think Hegel is advocating for a kind of

³⁶ Pinkard, p. 101, par. 165. Italics in the original.

extreme idealism, perhaps even a kind of Berkeleyan or subjective idealism.³⁷ This would be to read Hegel as claiming that truth is reducible to certainty in the sense that reality is reducible to mental states.³⁸ As we have seen, such a reading can be quickly put to the side as Hegel clearly characterizes self-consciousness as essentially involving an “other”: “It is in confronting an other that the I is itself. At the same time, it reaches out over and beyond this other, which, for the I, is likewise only itself.”³⁹ Similarly to what we saw in considering Hegel’s description of explanation as consciousness “just consorting with itself,” Hegel’s more detailed descriptions of self-consciousness as relating to itself via its relation to an other are surely difficult to square with the notion of a merely subjective, or solipsistic position. And working with the idea of infinite self-determination we can easily anticipate that in the latter quote Hegel is describing this very dynamic that self-consciousness sees as its own, the structure it thinks it must assume in overcoming the distinction between itself and its other. The way in which “consciousness is, to itself, the true” presumably has to do with the achievement of the transcendence of its other. So the question that arises is how this identification of certainty with truth fits into this structure of self-determination.⁴⁰

³⁷ Indeed Hegel identifies “infinity” with idealism in the *Encyclopedia* and *Science of Logic*. However, his reference to idealism has to do with the self-determination of thought in its infinite activity and is not an endorsement of a subjective idealism.

³⁸ While I don’t think Honneth maintains this view exactly, there are passages that suggest he endorses such a reading, at least in part. With respect to Hegel’s remark above Honneth states: “He means that the subject is now capable of perceiving itself as an authoritative source of its own knowledge about the world. Whatever ‘truth’ about reality it is capable of calling to mind is due . . . to an active act of consciousness that has already constituted the alleged object.” (p. 5) And he expands on this reading, “My awareness of the fact that reality is ultimately the content of my mental states is not enough to assure myself of my synthesizing and determining activity; rather, I perceive my consciousness just as selectively (*punktuell*) and passively as I perceive the mental attention I pay to it in that moment.” (p. 5) Shortly I will address how Honneth sees Hegel as endorsing a notion of subjectivity that is practically embedded and always engaged in “active praxis.” I take these quotes to indicate that Honneth finds Hegel using something of a Cartesian stepping-stone to motivate a more practically oriented subject.

³⁹ Pinkard p. 102; par. 166.

⁴⁰ Reading Hegel as plunging into a kind of pernicious idealism or solipsism is precisely the kind of unwarranted move the transformative reading prevents. Holding fast to the context that gives rise to self-consciousness--the problem of the inverted world and infinity--we are unlikely to take such a leap.

It is helpful to note Hegel's terminology here. "Certainty" [*Gewißheit*] and "truth" [*Wahrheit*] are a pair of terms that Hegel uses frequently and in some cases one can think of certainty as the subjective counterpart to truth. In the *Phenomenology*, however, the status of notions like "subjective" and "objective" are precisely the kind of fundamental distinctions that are in question and we should not assume that Hegel has in mind certainty as *mere* certainty, a subjective mental state that is in itself divorced from or lacking in objectivity. Thus, in order to grasp what Hegel is getting at we need more neutral notions to help us interpret this remark. One way to break down Hegel's terminology is to think of certainty as the appearance of truth, truth as it is for consciousness; and we can think of "truth" as the "in-itself" or essence of objects--the object of genuine knowledge. Parsing "certainty" and "truth" in this way does not require us to think of certainty as inherently falling short of truth. This is an important point because Hegel points out that for self-consciousness "certainty is in itself its object." It would be quite uncharitable--and very out of line with Hegel's overall project--to think Hegel is saying something along the lines that knowledge has for its object merely the state of *thinking* that one grasps the truth. While one may naturally focus on how one can be certain and yet lack knowledge, one can also emphasize that this gap does not seem to appear in the other direction. That is, it is difficult to see how one can have knowledge of something yet be uncertain about its being true. Indeed, this way of looking at the distinction between certainty and truth is in line with the shift we have identified thus far in which we are now considering knowledge as a unity of subject and object. Working with a more neutral notion of certainty, then, we can think of certainty in a positive sense: that it is the *experience* of coming to know. Being certain of something, as we commonly think of it, is the feeling that one really has grasped what is true. Certainty can be understood as the way knowledge appears to the subject, the sense we have of

achieving knowledge. Put differently, this achievement can be described as the experience of a unity between subject and object in which the subject is “being reflected into itself.”

The idea that we now have a “certainty that is the same as its truth” signals that the aim of our protagonist--now from the standpoint of self-consciousness--is to achieve its reflection into itself and that its infinite self-determination will exhibit an experience of self-awareness. Knowing is understood at this point as transcending the distinction between self and other and thereby determines itself as genuine knowledge that involves the sense of certainty of being genuine knowledge. Thus, truth and certainty come together here because knowledge is thought to consist in this return to self and having knowledge must consist in an awareness that one has knowledge. With this identity of certainty and truth, an identity we can qualify as falling under this dynamic of infinity in which differences are preserved, Hegel is marking that all knowing involves experiencing a sense of certainty, that “consciousness of an other, of an object as such, is indeed itself *necessarily* self-consciousness.”⁴¹

In line with the developmental approach I advocate for, the reading I am offering does not see Hegel’s claim as advancing certainty as a *replacement* for truth. Instead, certainty reemerges here as *adding* to our conception of knowledge, as the relation to the object of knowledge has revealed it must contain a subjective feature. Certainty first appears in the starting point for the entire *Phenomenology* in “Sense-Certainty,” in which certainty is thought to convey an immediate relation to the world. Here certainty appears in a more developed form as a self-relation that is mediated by a relation to another. In accordance with Hegel’s developmental approach and the idea that the development of consciousness throughout the *Phenomenology* exhibits its infinite self-determination in transcending the limitations experienced in each shape

⁴¹ Pinkard, p. 100; par. 164. Italics added.

of consciousness, we should expect that self-consciousness is an advancement of our previous position of consciousness, and that consciousness is *preserved* in our new shape of consciousness.

“Otherness thereby is for it *as a being*, or as a *distinguished moment*, but, for it, it is also the unity of itself with this difference as a *second distinguished moment*. With that first moment, self-consciousness is as *consciousness*, and the whole breadth of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time only as related to the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself.” (Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167)

Here Hegel is describing both the relation between ‘Consciousness’ and ‘Self-Consciousness’ and the latter shape of consciousness itself. With respect to the former relation we ought to understand that ‘Consciousness’ was working with an incomplete understanding of knowledge. From the standpoint of self-consciousness, we still understand knowledge as a relation to the world, a relation to an other that “is for it as a being.” But we have seen that this relation must be understood as figuring into a self-relation, that of “the unity of self-consciousness with itself.” Thus, we enter ‘Self-Consciousness’ with the understanding that ‘Consciousness’ is a “moment” or stage in advancing to a more complete conception of knowledge. At the same time self-consciousness itself is a self-relation that can only be accomplished via a relation to an “other,” a feature that is essential to infinite self-determination. Thus, moving forward, consciousness of the “sensuous world” is an essential feature of our new shape of consciousness and we will understand self-consciousness to relate to itself within the world.

The major shift that must be noted here is the priority of the self-relation of consciousness that emerges. Self-consciousness is not a matter of tacking on a reflective self-awareness to consciousness, as it were. Consciousness is a moment of self-consciousness and not the other way around. This means there is a fundamental shift in how the original cognitive relation to the world is characterized. We might put this point in the following way: all

consciousness of objects is now understood as self-consciously attending to them and our cognitive relation to the world is always mediated by a reflective self-relation. For the duration of ‘Self-Consciousness’ we will see a development of this rather bare idea--that of being in the world self-consciously--but it is worth outlining it briefly. In contrast to the idea that self-consciousness consists in a higher order observation of oneself, what I am proposing is that Hegel thinks of self-consciousness as a *self-aware mode of being*. This understanding of self-consciousness can be found in certain accounts of self-knowledge with respect to belief and action.⁴² The central idea is that belief and action can, and paradigmatically do, exhibit knowledge of what one is doing or believing, not by observing oneself, but in virtue of being the subject acting or believing. I know that, for instance, I am watching a film by watching it. I attend to the film self-consciously or *with self-awareness*. The knowledge I have of what I am doing is not altogether separate from the act. Similarly, we can say that I know that I know something in virtue of knowing. Knowing, on this view, is attending to the world in a self-conscious manner. This is how I am understanding Hegel’s claim that consciousness of objects is *necessarily* self-consciousness and moving forward the putative conceptions of knowledge that emerge will exhibit this essential feature of self-awareness.

5. Desire

Thinking of self-consciousness as a relation to the world that also exhibits self-awareness, it should not be too surprising to see Hegel connect it to desire. Desire certainly is an outward

⁴² Sebastian Rödl has some concise formulations of this conception of self-consciousness. He states: “First person reference depends on a way of knowing an object such that I know an object in this way by being this object. Unmediated first person thoughts articulate knowledge I possess, not by *perceiving*, but by *being* their object.” (2007; p. 9) Elizabeth Anscombe’s rather well known work ‘Intention’ (1957) describes a class of things that are not known observationally, a subclass of which is intentional actions. Pippin (2011) connects this understanding of self-consciousness to Hegel.

looking attitude, focused on attaining some object, that is also self-referring: one who has a desire for something feels a sense of lack which drives one to pursue that object and attaining the object of desire is to experience the satisfaction of that object. A number of commentators have pointed out that we can find what has been referred to as a “self-sentiment” in desire, especially in conjunction to life, what Hegel will claim is the immediate object of desire.⁴³ In this way, desire is a quite intuitive and appropriate example of the dynamic Hegel sees in self-consciousness. But desire is not presented as a mere *example* of a self-conscious attitude; it is presented as a claim about what self-consciousness is in general:

“The sensuous world is thereby for it a stable existence, which is, however, only *appearance*, or is the difference which *in-itself* has no being. But this opposition between its appearance and its truth has only the truth for its essence, namely, the unity of self-consciousness with itself. This unity must become essential to self-consciousness, which is to say, self-consciousness is *desire* itself. [*Begierde überhaupt*]” (Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167)⁴⁴

There are a number of complicated and interesting aspects to the claim (or claims) Hegel is making here, but perhaps the most striking is that self-consciousness seems to be *identified* with desire. While it is one thing to say that desire is always or (paradigmatically) self-conscious, it is quite another to claim that self-consciousness is desire.⁴⁵

⁴³ The term “self-sentiment” [*Selbstgefühl*] can be found in Hegel’s *Anthropology* and in the *Phenomenology of Mind* he claims that “Self-consciousness . . . knows itself implicit in the object, which in this outlook is conformable to the appetite.” (p. 168, ‘Philosophy of Mind,’ Part 3 of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, W. Wallace trans. 1971) Kojève contrasts this mere “sentiment of self” that is attained in mere animals, with full-fledged self-consciousness that is attained in human beings. Pippin (1989) also speaks of the “immediate self-sentiment of life” that occurs in living beings that may not yet understand themselves as desiring beings. (p. 151)

⁴⁴ Pinkard actually renders “*Begierde überhaupt*” as “desire, full stop. Shortly I will address the significance of Hegel’s qualification of “*überhaupt*” but for now I will not add in this fairly unique translation given by Pinkard, which we admits is a matter of interpretation.

⁴⁵ Pippin (2011) draws attention to this deceptively simply, yet quite substantial aspect of Hegel’s claim: “There would be no problem here, or not as much of one, if Hegel had just noted that human desire is self-conscious desire (something that he also of course holds). That would be to make the point that self-conscious desirers do not desire in episodic and isolated moments of desire; they desire in the light of the other things they desire, for one thing, and that alone is a way of saying that the desire itself is self-conscious (and not tht human desires are like animal desires but “then” can also be self-monitored). But Hegel’s speculative “reverse” predication is what requires a deeper interpretation.” (p. 29)

Perhaps the most influential commentator on ‘Self-Consciousness’ and the ‘Master-Slave Dialectic’ contained therein is Alexander Kojève. Recognizing how bold Hegel’s claim about desire is, Kojève interprets it in an equally bold manner.

“The man who is “absorbed” by the object that he is contemplating can be “brought back to himself” only by a Desire; by the desire to eat for example. The (conscious) Desire of a being is what constitutes that being as I and reveals it as such by moving it to say “I . . .””⁴⁶

Kojève seems to think that *only* desire can constitute the reflective relation of self-consciousness, an awareness of the self or the “I.” While this appears as a rather strong claim, Hegel must mean *something* along these lines, as he singles out desire in the way he does. But Kojève’s interpretation is likely to strike one as rather implausible at the outset. This tension ought to guide our inquiry as we sort out why Hegel places desire at the center of our understanding of self-consciousness.

There are two particular points that need to be addressed in order to clear up this interpretive difficulty. First is that Hegel is concerned with the unity of self-consciousness and he is certainly aware of the import and scope of such a unity.⁴⁷ So it appears quite mysterious that Hegel introduces desire as directly connected to this unity: “This unity must become essential to self-consciousness, which is to say, self-consciousness is *desire* itself.”⁴⁸ One way to formulate this issue is to ask why we are turning to what seems to be *one particular faculty* of a conscious or living creature (alongside perhaps others like willing, thinking, etc.), when Hegel seems clearly focused on the overall unity of self-consciousness, something more on a par with the

⁴⁶ Kojève (1969; pp. 3-4).

⁴⁷ Hegel is surely no stranger to the significance of Kant’s unity of apperception. Indeed, Hegel’s sensitivity to unity of the ‘I’ in its role in conceptual thought is difficult to overstate. While Hegel considers Kant’s views in his early *Faith and Knowledge*, his concern with Kant and the unity of apperception continue through his *Science of Logic*. Pippin (both 1989 and 2018) is perhaps the commentator best known for highlighting the connections between Hegel and Kant on the issue of self-consciousness.

⁴⁸ Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167.

unity of apperception. This speaks to precisely why Kojève seems to be saddling Hegel with a quite bold claim. What is puzzling about this claim is that the unity he is concerned with would presumably *give* unity to various desires rather than be reduced to, or identified with, desire. The text leading up to this claim discusses the issue of the relation of self-consciousness to itself, its achievement of a unity of “selfsameness” in overcoming an “opposition” between “appearance” and “truth,” all of which seems to hang on Hegel’s claim about desire. So at a minimum we need to clear a path by which we can see desire as significant to the unity of self-consciousness itself.

Once we are able to see why desire *can* play the role of grounding the unity of self-consciousness, the second step in interpreting Hegel’s claim is to address why he in fact does choose desire to convey this unity. My answer to this question will be that desire has a direct connection to the self-determining structure of infinity. As we have seen, the whole dynamic of how self-consciousness is self-determining through its relation to an “other” emerged from consciousness taking infinity as its object. If now Hegel is in some way *identifying* self-consciousness with desire, then it stands to reason we should be able to identify some direct connection between desire and infinity. Making this connection seems to be essential to seeing the continuity in this transition.⁴⁹

The way to approach the first issue, I maintain, is to see Hegel as thinking about desire as it figures into a particular kind of aim, specifically, what Sebastian Rödl calls *infinite ends*. Infinite ends can best be understood by contrasting them with finite ends. Often when we think of desires we cast them in terms of finite ends: a drive for an end that will extinguish the drive in

⁴⁹ Given my overall interpretive strategy and understanding of the critical project of the *Phenomenology* as I have presented it in chapter 1, it follows that I will endorse what Scott Jenkins (2009) calls a “contextualist” reading in which the identification of desire with self-consciousness marks a claim about our protagonist at this stage in the dialectic. In contrast, Jenkins thinks of this claim as a general claim about “rational, sentient beings.” (p. 105) Not only do I think this goes against Hegel’s methodology and overall project, but it also draws one away from seeing some important features of how Hegel is understanding the self-determination of knowing.

question. Kojève, for instance, naturally gravitates toward the example of a desire for food.⁵⁰ Having such a desire specifies its object in such a way that attaining it entails that one will then lack that desire, e.g. consuming food leads to a lack of hunger. Now, if we were to identify the unity of self-consciousness, the subject, or even a “mere animal” with a desire of this character, it would seem that the unity would extend no further than the particular act of gaining the satisfaction in question. That is, as the desire terminates in gaining its object, so would the subject, as it were. This is, of course, a claim very much lacking in promise to say the least. We certainly want to allow for such desires to be able to re-emerge for individuals and that one and the same subject can have different desires. In ascribing to a subject desires with finite ends, then, we presuppose a subject, a unity of the ‘I,’ that persists beyond the termination of those desires and gives order to a series of desires. Thus, the unity of self-consciousness does not seem to coincide with desire understood as the pursuit of finite ends.

Another way to put the above point is to say that the desire of finite ends does not reveal what is essential to the unity of self-consciousness in general. Appealing to some further source of order when understanding such desires as belonging to one and the same subject reveals this. Infinite ends, on the other hand, are ends that do not terminate the drive to reach them. Reaching an infinite end does not entail that the desire for that end will be extinguished. Rödl’s example of an infinite end is health. One can desire to be healthy and pursue this end, but when one achieves a state of health, it does not follow that one will lack the desire to be healthy. One can desire health even if one is healthy. Infinite ends are *time-general* as Rödl puts it, and do not “admit of the contrast that defines finite ends: of being on the way toward and having reached the end.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ As does Brandom in his ‘The Structure of Desire and Recognition: Self-consciousness and Self-constitution’ in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 33 no. 1 (2007).

⁵¹ *Self-Consciousness*, p. 36.

This notion of an infinite end is given in Rödl's account of self-conscious action and, expanding on this idea slightly, he claims that an infinite end explains an action as a *manifestation of itself* in which something is not exhausted by its manifestations. This is to say that the drive for health is not exhausted by the various acts of pursuing health that are manifestations of this drive and, in fact, these manifestations can actually promote the desire in question, i.e. engaging in healthy acts can encourage one's desire to be healthy.⁵² Moreover, as infinite ends can have various manifestations--eating certain foods, exercising, getting enough rest, etc.--they provide unity to these acts in a way that finite ends cannot.⁵³ Infinite ends admit of the characterization of a *way of being* that reference the constitution of who or what something is. The pursuit of health certainly has to do with a thing's constitution as a living being, but infinite ends also apply to the pursuit of things like careers and social roles, which are continuously fostered and attended to and provide unity to a multitude of manifestations centered around these ends. Desire, then, factors into infinite ends as a drive to establish and perpetuate a principle of unity that we can think of as formative of one's identity.⁵⁴

Thinking of desire specifically in terms of a drive for infinite ends, then, provides a way to see a direct connection between two elements that may otherwise appear puzzling in Hegel's claim: that of the unity of self-consciousness and desire.⁵⁵ With infinite ends we see a principle

⁵² Importantly, though, this is not to say that there may be some cases in which reaching an infinite end *can* extinguish the desire for it. While, for instance, being healthy does not entail that one no longer desires to be healthy, one could feel that one has met their goal of reaching a certain measure of health and therefore lose the drive to continue the pursuit of health in the relevant sense. But health is not an end that *necessitates* the extinguishing of the desire for health in the same way hunger is extinguished.

⁵³ See Rödl's discussion of desire (pp. 25-34). There he argues that actions cannot be explained in terms of a calculation from desires and that desires themselves are insufficient to provide the principle of unity necessary to explain an action.

⁵⁴ To be clear, I am not suggesting something like a hard and fast distinction between finite and infinite ends. As we have seen finite ends are certainly integrated into infinite ends, e.g. eating as a part of pursuing health. The point I wish to emphasize is that Hegel's focus is with desire as it relates to infinite ends and that this is the register at which he is treating the unity of self-consciousness.

⁵⁵ Rödl actually makes a contrast between desires, which he takes to have finite ends, and infinite ends. I take it that he has in mind desires as they often are treated in contemporary views in philosophy of action in which actions are

of unity that involves a drive for its manifestation. Insofar as one's pursuit of health (to stick with the above example) is essential to one, one certainly desires to be healthy, and this desire is not a mere temporary want for a particular kind of healthy food, or an inclination to go to the gym: it is a desire that perpetuates a unity underlying various activities. Such a desire speaks to what is important or essential to that person. And such a pursuit certainly can *become* essential to someone, as Hegel states the unity of self-consciousness must become essential to it.⁵⁶ That is, one can take up a genuine concern with one's health, one's career or one's role as a mother, even if one had already been already pursuing these infinite ends in some lesser sense.⁵⁷

Noting the distinctive character of infinite ends allows us to see desire as operating at a register and scope that is much more applicable to the unity of self-consciousness.⁵⁸ But while we have an understanding of desire that is intuitively compatible with manifesting a unity, we are naturally led to ask why Hegel singles out the *drive* to manifest a unity specifically. Why, we might ask, is Hegel focusing on the drive for an infinite end and not the infinite end itself? This brings us to our second condition of understanding desire's connection to infinity.

The connection to infinity needs to be prefaced with the acknowledgement that when Hegel introduces the concept of desire the unity of self-consciousness, "the selfsameness of itself with itself" is not yet manifest. Reference to this point is made a few different times in this

explained in terms of a calculation from desire. (*Self-Consciousness*, p. 25) Thus, despite the terminological difference, I do not think Hegel's use of desire as a drive for infinite ends, as I am proposing, is at odds with Rödl's view.

⁵⁶ There are two other main sources of support for thinking of desire as connected to infinite ends. As I will show, infinite ends are required to make sense of desire as it factors into infinite self-determination. Only with infinite ends do we get a sense in which the distinction between desire and satisfaction is preserved. But also, looking forward to the objects that emerge in 'Self-Consciousness,' we see examples of precisely infinite ends, namely, life and recognition.

⁵⁷ See Pippin's *Hegel on Self-Consciousness* (2011; p. 29) for a similar gloss on this point.

⁵⁸ There is a further point that Rödl develops here, that of a practical life form understood as an "objective unity of infinite ends." (*Self-Consciousness*, p. 38) This is a ranked system of infinite ends, in which infinite ends are elements of this overarching unity. I have decided to omit discussion of his notion of a practical life form at this point in order to not cloud our interpretation of how Hegel talks about the unity of self-consciousness and the dynamic of infinity.

transition. At the end of ‘Force and Understanding’ he states that “the cognition of *what consciousness knows while knowing itself* requires still further circumstances,” and that “It must be seen how the shape of self-consciousness first makes its appearance,” alluding to the self-determination of self-consciousness, even in its initial form, still needing to take place.⁵⁹ We begin ‘Self-Consciousness’ with only the *claim* that knowing must be self-determining and that this self-determination must exhibit infinity. This claim, of course, already contains certain conditions on what this self-determination will look like, but we have yet to see self-consciousness as the achievement of this self-relation. This already indicates that self-consciousness is initially a drive for self-determination, but there are further reasons why this drive ought to be understood as central to self-consciousness at this point.

We will recall that, with respect to this movement in Hegel’s Logic, genuine infinity emerges out of a contradiction found in the idea of negative infinity. Defined solely as a lack of limit or finitude, negative infinity reveals itself as having a limit and, therefore, finite. This contradiction can be understood as having to do with negative infinity failing to, in a sense, make good on its claim to be infinite. From this we can see that negative infinity, which turns out to be finite, contains the impetus to transcend its limitations in order to be the “genuine” infinity it implicitly ought to be.⁶⁰ What drives genuine infinity to be posited is the contradiction found in negative infinity that requires the transcendence of its limitations so that the infinite can emerge out of the finite. With desire we see two elements that are essential to this notion. First desire is a lack. It imposes a limitation in specifying its object as something to be had. Second, this lack or limitation is at the same time a drive to overcome the limitation at hand and attain its object. Put

⁵⁹ Pinkard, p. 101, par. 165 and p. 102, par. 167, respectively.

⁶⁰ Hegel connects the impetus of the finite to transcend its limitation to “the ought,” or “the imperative” that comes from itself. (*Science of Logic*, p. 106, 21:122)

in these terms, the parallel, at a structural or logic level of analysis, between desire and negative infinity is evident. Desire captures the posture of negative infinity as the drive toward genuine infinity, a drive that is revealed by an internal inconsistency in the negative conception of infinity itself. It's limitation is seen as immediately incompatible with what it ought to be and as a barrier to be overcome in order for negative infinity to realize itself as its true determination of genuine infinity.

There is a further point about genuine infinity being the aim of self-consciousness that needs to be kept in mind and reveals such an end to be an infinite end, as we specified above. With the achievement of genuine infinity, we will recall, we see the emergence of the infinite out of the self-relating activity of finite beings, exhibited in things like thinking, life and Spirit. And Hegel is clear that this emergence is by no means the collapse of the distinction between the finite and the infinite, it is rather the sublation and preservation of that distinction. He states that “the unity of the finite and the infinite is not an external bringing together of them.” Instead “the infinite is only as the transcending of the finite; it therefore contains its other essentially. . .”⁶¹ At a minimum, then, the object of desire must be something that is not annihilated or destroyed, as the relation to the “other” must remain in place, even if we allow for this “other” or the relation to it, to take on some new sublated form. Conversely, the desire must not be completely extinguished either, as it determines the sense of lack and separation between self and other. So we see that the emergence of infinity as an end for self-consciousness is consistent with thinking of this end as an infinite end, which is not terminated and does not exhaust its corresponding desire. We can then anticipate that the aim of achieving infinity, whatever it may amount to

⁶¹ *Science of Logic*, p. 116, 21:133.

exactly, will consist in some sort of self-maintaining and self-preserving activity that involves a continual “transcending” of limits.

Hegel’s use of *überhaupt* matches up nicely with the idea that, at this very early stage in the chapter, self-consciousness is desire *itself* or desire *in general*, as opposed to emerging initially as some specific form of desire.⁶² In general, if we are bringing into focus that knowledge is self-determining, the starting point ought to be an abstract one, allowing for the process of bringing in content and determinacy. The qualification that self-consciousness is desire *überhaupt* marks that we have yet to articulate the sense of satisfaction that corresponds to it. Nonetheless, desire in and of itself has some determinacy to it and it can be thought to exemplify a drive for infinite self-determination in the pursuit of infinite ends. There is, then, a point of clarification that needs to be made with respect to what I have said about infinite ends. I have argued that desire needs to be understood as directed at infinite ends in order to be consistent with Hegel’s claim about the unity of self-consciousness. I have not, however, claimed that this is entirely explicit for our protagonist. The progression from an initially abstract conception of desire, to a more determinate conception of desire--specifically within a life-form that exhibits infinite ends-- will be addressed in the next chapter. In accordance with the idea that we have only a mere claim to achieve infinite self-determination at the outset, desire first appears in an abstract and general way. Infinite ends are the ends implicit in Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness is desire and it allows us to anticipate that even the initial or “immediate” object of desire, life, will exemplify an infinite end.

6. Self-Consciousness as Practical

⁶² Yet another possible translation adopted by Pinkard is desire “full stop.”

Taking desire as connected to infinite self-determination provides us with a novel way to see a “practical turn” in the unfolding of self-consciousness. At the outset we saw the problem of the inverted world motivating the need to see unity and difference as compatible and interdependent. The overcoming of limitations in infinity is supposed to offer a framework of how this is the case: it is the idea of a unity that is formed via differences. Part of this idea of infinity is that we no longer understand unity as a static object, but essentially a *movement*. In contrast to the fixed and empty unity of laws and forces, infinity is an active *formation* of a unity in “sublating” distinctions. It is a conception of unity that is inseparable from change and flux, a “pure self-movement” [*reinen Sich-selbst-bewegens*]. And with this being the only viable sense of unity on the table for our protagonist, insofar as self-consciousness is to exhibit such a unity, this shape of consciousness will be understood as essentially active. Desire furthers the sense that we *must* understand our new shape of consciousness in a practical, active form, as self-consciousness is a drive to overcome the distinction between itself and its object. The initial sense that we cannot understand subjectivity in terms of a fixed entity or relatum arises out of the problem of the inverted world and our attempt to have a determinate object of knowledge. It does not require adding in further assumptions about the primacy of practical knowledge or seeing Hegel to be changing topics abruptly.

While infinite self-determination can give us an initial sense that we need to think of self-consciousness as active, it can seem to provide only a fairly thin sense in which self-consciousness is practical. Desire, however, provides a way to see the drive for this self-determination in a more concrete sense that conveys the experience of this drive and the self-awareness that characterizes it. The idea of infinite self-determination and the notion of self-consciousness that Hegel is working with is distinctive in that it negotiates between two extremes

with respect to understanding a relation between subject and object. On the one hand, there is a concern to not collapse the distinction between subject and object and see the self-determination at issue is a solipsistic position with no external constraint. This much is apparent in the demand for a genuine “otherness” that must be present for self-consciousness. On the other hand, the distinction between subject and object cannot be already fixed independently of consciousness and the object simply given to the subject. The subject must have a part in determining what counts as an object for it. Desire marries these constraints. It provides a relation to an object where that object is presented as genuinely distinct from the subject, yet this distinction is not intelligible in isolation from the subject. So desire provides not only a sense that its object provides some kind of resistance to the subject, a robust sense of otherness, but it also provides a sense in which this very same object is given a determinate significance by the desiring subject. Desire as a practical orientation gives its object the significance of self-reference, it is a goal or aim for the subject and not an object that is indifferent to the subject.

Developing the notion of desire a bit further we can note that desire is a kind of intentional relation to its object and one that is fundamental to self-determining beings. One place where we find some helpful points to explicate this intentional relation is in Robert Brandom’s unique approach to Hegel.⁶³ Brandom takes desire to indicate a kind of “proto-consciousness” that exemplifies a kind of relation between a desirous being and its environment with a practical classification of what will and what will not satisfy that desire. Brandom states that a “creature can *take* or *treat* some particular as being of a general kind by responding to it in one way rather than another.”⁶⁴ The object of desire has a determinacy, a genuine “otherness” for a desirous being, and this determinacy has to do with how this environment is “for another.” A

⁶³ I am referring, of course, to Brandom’s “de re” approach to historical texts.

⁶⁴ Brandom (2007), p. 132.

creature's desire or system of desires lends significance to its environment in this practical classification and this lends a sense of correctness to the practical activity of pursuing satisfaction. Importantly, a desire is more than a fixed response to features of the environment in the way that inanimate objects like a piece of iron rust in some environments and not in others. Contrasting desire from what he calls a “reliable differential responsive disposition,” Brandom says:

“A desire is more than a disposition to act in certain ways, since the activities one is disposed to respond to objects with may or may not satisfy the desire, depending on the character of those objects.”⁶⁵

In contrast to the dispositions of inanimate objects, desire admits of the possibility of error. A desirous being can fail to get satisfaction, even if there is a great drive to attain it. Connecting to what we have already said, the felt lack and the impetus to avoid error all points to the self-awareness, however primitive, that is constitutive of desire. To ascribe to a being a desire is to also ascribe to it some kind of primitive self-awareness that is guiding the pursuit of its object, a “self-sentiment” that is fulfilled in satisfaction.

Our reflections on desire as a practical and intentional attitude certainly anticipate our next object of consciousness, namely, life. This topic will be taken up in the next chapter and there we will see significant development of the main ideas broached with respect to desire, infinity and self-determination. But already we can note some important advancements we have made toward the desiderata outline at the outset of the dissertation, much of which has been aided by our employment of the transformative reading presented in chapter 1. We have identified a shift in our new shape of consciousness towards a more practical orientation--a

⁶⁵ Brandom (2007), p. 133.

substantial shift we can allow for given that we are not committed to a static criterion of adequacy specified at the outset. But this shift is directly tied to the problem of the inverted world and infinity, which we have paid careful attention to in light of our concern with the experience of consciousness and the developmental nature of these experiences. The second desideratum, we will recall, is that transitions ought to exemplify Hegel's phenomenological method and be presented as epistemologically motivated. We have seen that the concern for understanding the epistemological subject as self-determining arises out of an inability to have a viable object of knowledge, conceived, at that point, as forces or natural laws. One can then trace a line from a more familiar epistemological position akin to scientific realism to the somewhat unorthodox position of thinking of knowledge as desire. But even the emergence of desire, on the reading I have presented, has to do with the idea that knowledge must be understood as a self-conscious relation to the world. The shift in how we are thinking about knowledge, however, is substantial. Not only does the transformative process we have outlined allow for this, but we have made some way towards meeting our third desideratum: that we should be able to see how 'Self-Consciousness' constitutes some progress towards absolute knowing. With desire as the drive to transcend limitations we begin to bring into view the notion that knowing is self-determining and self-developing. Coming to the surface is knowing as "speculative thinking" and the "coming-to-be of *science itself*." [*dies Werden des Wissenschaft überhaupt*]⁶⁶ And while this is just barely coming into view, with desire we have a fairly determinate idea that we are venturing into thinking of knowing as a way of being in the world. Already in the opening pages of 'Self-Consciousness' we are venturing past the idea that the epistemic subject is a Cartesian

⁶⁶ Pinkard, p. 17, par. 27.

subject intelligible in isolation from its environment and independent from its object.⁶⁷ Put differently, we are seeing how genuine knowledge is separating itself from the “representational thought” that is characteristic of ‘Consciousness’ and drawing closer to self-determining Spirit.

⁶⁷ Honneth (2012) draws special attention to self-consciousness being practically embedded. As Honneth puts it, self-consciousness “is not a placeless, selective consciousness, but always related to organic reality in active praxis.” (p. 7)

Life, Recognition and the Appearance of Self-Consciousness

Chapter 3

Despite its difficulty and obscurity, the transition to recognition and the ensuing master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology* are no doubt among the most influential and well known aspects of Hegel's corpus. From the claim that self-consciousness is "desire *überhaupt*" and that "the immediate object of desire is what is living,"¹ Hegel arrives at the claim that "self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness."² In light of these intriguing yet puzzling remarks, a great deal of attention has been given to it in the secondary literature. But within this attentiveness one can see a general tension with its interpretation. While one can find an intuitive gloss on what seems to be the main idea of this overall transition, it is difficult to avoid the sense that Hegel is making a fairly substantial theoretical leap in the turn towards recognition.³

The main idea of this transition might be summarized in the following way: Hegel is articulating a distinction between beings we consider to be self-conscious and those we do not,

¹ Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167 and p. 104, par. 168 respectively.

² Pinkard, p. 107, par. 175.

³ Some examples of this in the secondary literature will be mentioned in the pages to come. One particularly explicit example is Alexandre Kojève (1969) who simply asserts that Hegel that the "existence of *several* Desires [or self-conscious beings] that can desire one another mutually" is an "irreducible premise" in Hegel's project, casting recognition, or at least the positing of another desirous being, as a *presupposition* for Hegel. Axel Honneth (2012), on the other hand, does not claim that Hegel is making any such presupposition, but rather reads into this transition some rather substantial and far-fetched conceptual apparatus not to be found in the text. He likens Hegel's conception of self-consciousness as initially a Winnicottian developmental state of ontogenesis. Honneth sees self-consciousness as desire to suffer from a "delusion of omnipotence" with an "ontological need" that can only be satisfied by an intersubjective encounter.

placing sociality as central to this distinction.⁴ Whereas we might think of non-human animals as immediately driven by instinctual desire, self-consciousness beings—perhaps those we consider to be rational or language users—are related to their lives in a way that is mediated by a reflective self-relation. The latter—beings we naturally think of as human beings—can have attitudes toward their lives, attitudes that may motivate, deter or prioritize vital activities. And this reflective relation to one’s activities and even one’s existence is something that is made possible by our social relations to one another. Our cognitive relations and interests take precedence over our more immediate instinctual desires and mediates our natural existence in ways that are not available to beings that lack self-consciousness. On this gloss, then, the turn towards recognition has to do with articulating this distinction and seeing sociality as an essential feature of self-consciousness.

No doubt there is something intuitive and intriguing here. One certainly gets this impression that Hegel is onto a very rich philosophical thought. With this gloss, however, a number of issues immediately present themselves. First, if we think Hegel is contrasting beings that lack self-consciousness—such as non-rational animals—with beings that are self-conscious, then it seems odd that the first object of self-consciousness is life. Why would Hegel turn initially to an object that he thinks either lacks self-consciousness or is not the defining feature of self-consciousness? Second, the role of life in the above gloss is quite complicated. Not only do we think that self-conscious beings are not completely beholden to their natural existence, but we also think that self-conscious beings are living beings. That is, life can be seen to play both a

⁴ It is not accidental that this general gloss has a great many parallels to Kojève’s reading, as it is perhaps one of the most influential interpretive pieces on this aspect of Hegel’s thought. Kojève (1969) states that “the Animal attains only *Selbst-gefühl*, *Sentiment* of self, but not *Selbst-bewusstsein*, *Self-Consciousness*—that is, it cannot *speak* of itself, it cannot *say* “I. . . “ (p. 39) And he goes on to say that “It is only Desire of such a *Recognition* (*Anerkennung*), it is only Action that flows from such a Desire, that creates, realizes and reveals a *human*, non-biological I.” (p. 40)

constraining and enabling role for a self-conscious being. So even granting this picture of a self-conscious beings, we still have a complicated dynamic to sort out. Finally, we ought to be able to identify an impetus to single out the social relation of recognition specifically as *the* mode in which this dynamic is realized. There are certainly many creatures that are social in varying degrees that we are not eager to label as self-conscious. If recognition is playing an important or essential role in understanding self-consciousness, then we should be able to find in the text a compelling reason why we should be drawn to posit another self-conscious being.

My interpretation is intended to answer the above questions, although it will depart somewhat from the above gloss on this transition. In my view, Hegel's main task remains focused on the project stated in his introduction: "the *investigation* and *testing of the reality of cognition*."⁵ Rather than making sweeping claims about human nature, I maintain that in this transition is Hegel working with an innovative understanding of knowledge that substantially departs from the position of "Consciousness" and follows from the failures of that chapter. My interpretation is novel in two ways. First, I understand self-consciousness to have a conflicted relation to life. On the one hand, Hegel is clear that life represents the *infinite* for self-consciousness (what he refers to elsewhere as "genuine infinity") in exhibiting self-sufficiency in its self-determining activities. On the other hand, life represents a sense of *finitude* for self-consciousness as a limitation. The demands of natural impulses present a constraint and form of dependency that self-consciousness sees as incompatible with its own claim of self-determination. Navigating these opposing aspects of this "doubled object" will prove to be instrumental in seeing the necessity of positing another self-consciousness and, as we will see, this conflicted relation exhibits the developmental aspect of the transformative view in that

⁵ Pinkard, p. 54, par. 81.

reference to life is preserved and transformed in the transition to recognition and not dispensed with. Second, I interpret the transition to recognition as keeping with the transformative reading of Hegel's methodology in which recognition emerges as "a result which contains the truth of the previous knowing has within itself."⁶ The constraint of natural impulses reveals self-consciousness as determined by its object, instead of self-determining. With this insight our protagonist seeks to be its own object, not by standing in a second order relation to itself, but by positing another self-consciousness as its object. This interpretation, I maintain, not only avoids ascribing to Hegel any substantial commitments about the relation between self-consciousness and sociality that are not already present in the text, but it also reveals recognition as playing an important role in advancing towards a satisfactory account of knowledge. Recognition provides a way in which self-consciousness appears or is manifest to itself, bringing us closer to a view of knowledge as self-determining.

Section 1 addresses the relation between life and knowledge in Hegel's thought and in section 2 I provide an interpretation of exactly how life is an object for self-consciousness, outlining the dual significance of this object. Section 3 considers the prominent interpretation of Fred Neuhouser, which I argue fails to recognize the aforementioned dual significance of life and, as a result, lacks a convincing reading of the emergence of recognition. In section 4 I give my own reading of this transition and section 5 elaborates on the significance of recognition with respect to its advance towards absolute knowing.

1. Knowing and Life

⁶ Pinkard p. 58, par. 87.

The starting point of this transition is marked by Hegel's claim that self-consciousness as desire takes life to be its immediate object and, as the transformative view indicates, to properly grasp the emergence of recognition, we need to see how the previous shape of consciousness reveals some kind of inconsistency on its own terms. Identifying such a failure, then, presupposes a fairly firm grasp of this initial position. Contrast this position with the opening section of 'Consciousness.' There we begin with an uncompromising empiricism that claims knowledge consists in an immediate receptive relation to objects unhindered by "conceptualizing" and we can easily anticipate the broadly Kantian claim that such an understanding of knowledge omits the necessity of unifying sensory appearances. But with the opening of 'Self-Consciousness' we begin in a much less familiar place. Placing desire and life as central to how we understand knowledge is already a quite substantial position, making it all the more difficult to see how that position itself somehow undergoes a failure giving rise to a conception of knowledge in which recognition is central. Thus, there is good reason to take great care to establish precisely both how Hegel is thinking about life as related to our overall object, i.e., genuine knowledge, and how Hegel understands life to be the object of self-consciousness. In this section I will consider the first issue before moving on to consider the second issue in the next section.

In the above gloss on the overall point of this transition one question that presented itself is why Hegel would turn to life as the immediate object of self-consciousness if he aims to contrast merely living creatures with self-conscious beings. To answer this question we first need to remind ourselves of the insights from the last chapter. Hegel does not see life as indifferent to, or in opposition to knowledge and thought. Quite the opposite. Hegel sees life as a self-constituting, formative activity that exhibits the same structure that knowledge also exhibits. In addition to what we have said about infinity in the previous chapter, this connection between life

and knowledge is most explicit in his later writings, but there are also clear signs of it in how Hegel thinks about the project of the *Phenomenology* as a whole.⁷ While I can by no means offer a comprehensive account of Hegel's views on the relation between cognition and life here, I can sketch out enough of Hegel's view on life to show that it is quite important to understanding Hegel's views on knowledge and subjectivity. There are three interrelated features to life that can guide our understanding of how Hegel sees life as related to knowledge: that knowledge must be understood as active, that this activity is purposive, and that the purposiveness of life reveals a primitive or immediate kind of subjectivity.⁸

The necessity of understanding knowledge as active is already presented in 'Force and the Understanding.' If knowledge of objects involves bringing appearances under a common order, a unity, then, as the problem of the inverted world reveals, we cannot conceive of the operative notion of unity as something that excludes differences among these appearances. This idea of a unity that is defined as merely a lack of difference, Hegel calls abstract or empty. Thought of as incompatible with distinctions, this conception of an abstract unity precludes it from being able to unify different appearances or bring varying phenomena under a common order of intelligibility. To bring together these elements of difference and unity, Hegel thinks we need to think of concepts not as static elements of thought, but as figuring into a dynamic movement of unification.

“When they are taken as fixed determinations and consequently in their separation from each other and not held together in an organic unity, then they are dead forms and the spirit which is their living, concrete unity does not dwell in them.”⁹ (Miller, p. 48)

⁷ These comments I discuss in the next few pages I take to give more textual backing for what I refer to as the “critical dimension” of the turn to self-consciousness taking infinity as its object, discussed in chapter 2.

⁸ The short treatment I give on the connection between life and subjectivity here draws from the works of Karen Ng (2016), Joshua Wretzel (2017) and Pippin (2019).

⁹ *Science of Logic*, Miller trans. Polity Press 1969, p. 48.

While there is a great deal to be said about how Hegel thinks of the “living, concrete unity” of concepts, we should note that Hegel’s reference to an organic unity is not merely a metaphor here.¹⁰ Central to much of Hegel’s thought is the rejection of an empty formalism and here he is remarking that knowing cannot consist in grasping mere forms of objects, empty unities divorced from their actual concrete existence. The reference to an organic unity has to do with a kind of logical structure that Hegel thinks is necessary to have an intelligible and determinate object of knowledge. An organic unity is essentially active and self-determining through change and difference. Thus, an organic unity is intertwined with the parts and alterations it unifies. This is part of what is behind Hegel’s remark that “the immediate idea is *life*.”¹¹ Life presents the immediate and perhaps most general instance of this logical structure of an organic unity.

It is, however, somewhat of a misnomer to think of this active, organic unity to apply *only* to the object of knowledge. Knowing is itself the realization of a subject-object unity that also cannot be adequately captured as an abstract unity.¹² The issue of relating unity and difference has its correlation in the relation of concept and object in the act of knowing. Accordingly, Hegel tells us that the mind is “not abstractly simple” and insofar as knowledge is employing concepts or categories and bringing various phenomena under a common order, we must see knowledge as itself functioning as a “living unity.” Not only should we think of mind or Spirit as “absolutely restless being, pure activity” according to Hegel, but this activity should be understood as directed at “the negating or ideality of every fixed category of the abstractive intellect.” Cognitive activity, for Hegel, exemplifies this structure of an organic unity and so

¹⁰ For a more thorough discussion of this issue see Pippin (2019), chapters 7 and 8.

¹¹ *Science of Logic*, Miller trans. p. 761.

¹² This is precisely the same point we found in the transition to self-consciousness: positing the organic unity of infinity as the way we understand difference and determinacy in general entails that we think of the subject, object and their relation as exhibiting this structure.

again his comments about the living unity of the mind signal a conceptual point about how we must think of the unity of subject and object.¹³

While this description remains fairly truncated, we can see that Hegel thinks of the structure of an organic unity as central to having a viable concept of knowledge. It provides, at a minimum, a starting point that does not have the initial problems of positing abstract unities or concepts that are divorced from their actualizations or instantiations, engendering a pernicious divide between subject and object. Above and beyond this starting point, however, we can develop this idea of an organic unity a bit further in order to see its connection to knowledge and subjectivity with respect to some more determinate features.

One central aspect of life that Hegel also sees in cognition is purposiveness. Hegel clearly states that “reason is *purposive* doing.”¹⁴ This is a natural advancement of the idea that knowing is “pure activity,” placing the operative source of unity in the ends of this activity. The mind, he states, is “not an essence that is already finished and complete before its manifestation,” indicating that its ends are essential to grasping the mind as such activity. This also parallels Hegel’s description of the *Phenomenology*, in which he claims that “the true is the whole. . . the

¹³ On the question of whether Hegel means his remarks about life and organic unity literally, I urge readers to take up this issue in a nuanced way. While it would surely be a mis construal to take Hegel literally in the sense that he is reducing the mind to biological processes, the position I am articulating does not take Hegel’s remarks about life to be merely metaphorical and only in the service of literary style. One could identify in the literature two camps on this issue: what one might label a “biological” understanding of Hegel’s use of life in various parts of his corpus, which tends to lean on the metaphysical import of his claims about organic unity, and what one might call a “structural” understanding of the role of life in which Hegel’s reference to an organic unity are taken to describe more so the dynamics of concepts and knowing. The former one might place authors like Thomas Khurana and Karen Ng, while the latter one might place an author such as Robert Pippin. However, I am quite hesitant to endorse such a division. Without attempting to sort out exactly how these authors would categorize their own views on this subject (as this would take us of course), I will say that the project here would find these categories unhelpful. For one, the nature of the text as an epistemological work, definitely places concerns with the structure of cognition as central. But also, the conception of knowing we are already at so early in the *Phenomenology* is focused on knowing as a unity of subject and object and, as far as I can see, would implicitly reject a substantial division between metaphysical and structural understandings of the notion of organic unity.

¹⁴ Pinkard, p. 14, par. 22.

essence completing itself through its own development.”¹⁵ Hegel famously takes this notion up in his methodology of traversing through the shapes of consciousness in the development or *Bildung* of consciousness up to the standpoint of science, achieved necessarily at the end of the *Phenomenology*. But it is not purposiveness in general that provides the connection between life and knowledge. Already in Hegel’s descriptions we can see that he thinks of the purposiveness of knowledge as more than simply its intentionality and the fairly uncontroversial idea that cognition is aimed at truth. Specifically, Hegel talks about the purposiveness of knowledge as *self-development* and *self-actualization*. What is unique about life and its organic unity is that its end is imminent within it. A living thing, by its nature, is driven to actualize itself and give itself its continued existence. To steal a phrase from Kant, a living thing is “both cause and effect of itself.”

The more narrow kind of purposiveness Hegel is concerned with has to do with activity which is self-referring, activity directed at self-realization or self-determination.

“[T]he living substance is the being that is in truth *subject*, or, what amounts to the same thing, it is in truth actual only insofar as it is the movement of self-positing, or, that it is the mediation of itself and its becoming-other-to-itself.” (Pinkard, p. 12, par. 18)

Essential to a living thing is that it strives to enact and maintain its own existence and in this way a living thing posits itself, or its own actualization. The activity of living is essentially a self-referring activity. We cannot understand life in general without understanding this self-actualization: that a living thing is not just a cause of movement in general, but cause of itself, its very own existence. In this reflective structure of the activity of living, Hegel sees a primitive or immediate kind of self-awareness wherein there is an essential “subjective” dimension to life.

“To intellect, where it finds its solution in the sense that there the object is reduced or raised to the appearance of a self-existent inner being. Such an appearance is the living being. It is in the contemplation of this, that self-consciousness is kindled; for in the

¹⁵ Pinkard, p. 13, par. 20.

living being the object is suddenly changed into something subjective; there consciousness discovers that it is itself the essential being of the object, it reflects itself out of the object into itself, becomes objective to itself.” (Sec. 418 Z)¹⁶

Here Hegel’s description of the subjectivity within life makes reference to life being an object for self-consciousness which will be the focus of the next section. For now, we can note that the reason why “self-consciousness is kindled” in the contemplation of life is that life exhibits a subjective dimension within itself. Far from thinking that life in general and mere animal life ought to be understood as completely lacking in self-consciousness, Hegel thinks we find the seed of self-consciousness in life, as it were. Life is then quite appropriately placed at the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness.’ However, thus far we have only outlined some connections between self-consciousness and life and have not yet considered how self-consciousness actually relates itself to life in the *Phenomenology*.

2. Life as the Object of Self-Consciousness

In his discussion of life in the Science of Logic, Hegel takes a very small detour from his official task of dealing with the logical notion, or “pure Idea” of life to contrast this topic with how spirit relates itself to life.

“Life as such, then is for spirit partly a *means*, and as such spirit opposes it to itself; partly spirit is a living individual and life is its body; and again, this unity of spirit with its living corporeality is born from spirit itself as an *ideal*.” (Miller, pp. 762-3, emphasis in the original)

This provides a quite succinct outline of the main aspects of the relation between self-consciousness and life. During the course of this chapter I will address all three parts of this relation as they arise in the *Phenomenology*: the opposition between self-consciousness and life,

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy or Mind: Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Wallace trans. Oxford University Press 1971.

the identification of self-consciousness as a living being, and the unity of self-consciousness with life, which I will argue is both a transcendence and an integration of its natural existence. But with this statement we see a tension in thinking of self-conscious beings as living beings, yet not *merely* living beings. In the last chapter we mentioned that the notion of self-consciousness Hegel has in mind is one that exhibits a distinctly self-aware mode of being, a way of relating to the world self-consciously that is always (at least potentially) mediated by self-reflection. This entails that this self-reflection informs the entire form of life of a self-conscious being, distinguishing it from a “merely” living being. At the same time, we have seen that there is some kind of self-reference already in living things that represents to self-consciousness its own self-awareness. So while there is certainly a sense in which self-consciousness must exhibit a development or departure from its natural existence, we must also recognize that self-consciousness and life share a similar structure of self-determination. It is precisely this tension that is explicated in more detail in the *Phenomenology* and shapes the relation of self-consciousness to life.

Shortly after Hegel asserts that self-consciousness is “desire *überhaupt*,” we are presented with the claim that the object of self-consciousness is life: “Through this reflective turn into itself, the object has become *life*.”¹⁷ More precisely, Hegel tells us that “the object of immediate desire is what is living” [*der Gegenstand der unmittelbaren Begierde ist ein Lebendiges*].¹⁸ The reflective turn Hegel mentions ought to be somewhat expected at this point, not only because we are dealing with self-consciousness, but also because it refers to the self-relating structure of infinity discussed in the last chapter. This notion of infinity will continue to be a focus moving forward and, as we will see more clearly, Hegel takes this reflective turn to be

¹⁷ Pinkard, p. 104, par. 168.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

present in both self-consciousness and its object, life. In our discussion in the last chapter I urged that desire ought to be understood specifically as related to infinite ends and so the introduction of life as our initial object should not be surprising. Life can be understood as the most immediate and pervasive infinite end. The drive to live is essential to the very existence of a living being, as living things do not simply subsist, but must perpetuate and maintain their existence through activity. But with the introduction of this object the above issue immediately presents itself regarding how exactly to characterize the relation of self-consciousness to life. Hegel seems quite clear that the infinite self-relation of central concern is that of self-consciousness to itself. So the introduction of an infinite object, namely, life, may seem to suggest that this shape of consciousness seeks to understand living as its own infinite end and form of self-determination. Indeed, in the transition to recognition Hegel states that we have “living self-consciousness” [*lebendiges Selbstbewußtsein*]. However, this remark comes after the object of life is initially characterized in terms of an “opposition” to self-consciousness in which self-consciousness “immediately marks its object with the character of the negative.”¹⁹ Bringing these points together, Hegel states that “this unity is, as we saw, equally as much its repelling [*Abstoßen*] itself from itself, and this concept *estranges* [*entzweit*] itself into the opposition between self-consciousness and life.”²⁰

We are presented with conflicting constraints in understanding life as the object of self-consciousness. On the one hand, insofar as both life and self-consciousness exhibit the self-relation of infinity, we can expect self-consciousness to identify with, or appropriate, life in some way. On the other hand, Hegel is clear that life is presented as being in opposition to self-consciousness. Such constraints would certainly appear perplexing if it were not for the dynamic

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

of infinity, which Hegel thinks we ought to be familiar with at this point. With infinity we have precisely the idea of a unity that includes distinctions within it, which seems to map onto this relation between self-consciousness and life. The conflicting constraints consist in these two relata forming a unity while at the same time being distinct from one another. In the following I will show how the structure of infinity can be used to articulate how we ought to understand life as the object of self-consciousness. I maintain that in order to reconcile these conflicting constraints we need to recognize life as having a dual significance for self-consciousness, representing both its end of achieving infinite self-determination and its finitude, i.e., the limitation that it must overcome in order to realize itself as infinite.

Initially we can see that the relation of self-consciousness to its object, in general, exhibits the self-determining structure of infinity as we have been considering it thus far. We will recall that the infinite emerges out of the finite by way of overcoming its limitations and thereby affirming that it is not bound by these limitations. This indicates that the object of self-consciousness, its “other,” is presented, at least in part, as the *means* by which to achieve its self-determination or self-sameness and Hegel describes this as a “doubled object” [*gedoppelten Gegenstand*].

“As self-consciousness, consciousness henceforth has a doubled object: The first, the immediate object, the object of sensuous-certainty and perception, which, however, is marked *for it* with the *character of the negative*; the second, namely, *itself*, which is the true *essence* and which is at the outset is present only in opposition to the first. Self-consciousness exhibits itself therein as the movement within which this opposition is sublated, and within which, to itself, the self-sameness of itself with itself comes to be.” (Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167)

The first sense of the object has to do with how the object is presented as a genuine “otherness” to consciousness. Previously in consciousness the object of knowledge was presumed to be determinate and fixed independently of the subject. With self-consciousness as desire, however,

the character of this otherness has shifted to a sense of lack and limitation separating self-consciousness from its object. This also indicates an implicit significance that this sense of lack is something to be overcome, a drive for satisfaction in which sublating the opposition between itself and its object will amount to the achievement of a return to itself.

All of this summarizes the movement of infinity and provides a quite general description of how self-consciousness as desire is supposed to achieve its self-determination. But with the introduction of life as the object in this schema, we get a dynamic that needs a bit more explanation. First, however, we ought to answer the question of why the object in question *must* be life. I have indicated that life matches up well with the idea of infinite ends, but Hegel sees this focus on life to be necessary. Given the previous discussion of the Understanding, we are left with the constraint that the only kind of object that could possibly count as a genuine object would have to be something that is able to ground distinctions within a unity, i.e. something that exhibits “being reflected into itself.”²¹ The distinctions of appearances and the abstract unifying principles of forces and laws do not appear, in and of themselves, as having genuine reality to self-consciousness, as they have been revealed as parasitic on the activity of consciousness. Thus, the object of self-consciousness, “what self-consciousness distinguishes from itself *as existing*” must be something that has its own principle of self-determination, something that cannot be said to (at least initially) be dependent upon consciousness. The idea, then, that the object of self-consciousness must exhibit a kind of self-sufficiency [*Selbstständigkeit*] leads us to see that both self-consciousness and life are thought to be self-determining: “For its part, the object, which for self-consciousness is the negative, has likewise *for us*, or *in itself*, returned into itself, just as consciousness, for its part, has done the same.”²²

²¹ Pinkard, p. 104, par. 168.

²² Ibid.

In considering infinity as a self-determining structure and the role of desire as a drive for this self-determination, we did not explicitly consider what Hegel is describing now: the relation of one infinite object to another infinite object. Both self-consciousness and life exhibit this self-determination and so we are now forced to consider how to understand this relation between the two. We have already mentioned different objects of philosophical significance that Hegel thinks exhibit this infinite self-relation such as life, nature the self, Spirit and so on. Presumably, these are distinct phenomena and, thus, we ought to be able to identify different forms of this infinite self-relation. However, the proposal at hand is to see one form of infinite self-relation as emerging out of its relation to another infinite object. Speaking of the opposition between self-consciousness and life and describing both in terms of the infinite structure of subsuming distinctions within a unity, Hegel says:

“The former is the unity *for which* the infinite unity of differences is, but the latter *is* only this unity itself such that this unity is not at the same time *for itself*. As self-sufficient as consciousness is, its object is *in-itself* just as self-sufficient.” (Pinkard, p. 104, par. 168)

The task for self-consciousness is to emerge as “for itself” in its relation to the self-sufficient object of life and to achieve its “self-sameness,” a task which involves the sublation of the opposition at hand. As this relation emerges, self-consciousness is understood as desire and so we can naturally see this opposition in terms of desire and satisfaction: life stands to self-consciousness as something it lacks in some sense. The question that presents itself, then, has to do with how this object elicits a sense of desire and how we ought to understand the satisfaction sought. Hegel describes the relation in this opposition as *sharing* the self-sufficiency of an “infinite unity” and so the desire or sense in which self-consciousness is lacking something with respect to this infinite self-determination, i.e., the way it is not yet “for itself,” needs to be specified.

First, we should note that if life is seen as an infinite end, then we need not think that self-consciousness lacks life entirely. This corresponds to the fact that Hegel already labels self-consciousness as an infinite unity, thereby exhibiting, at least implicitly, the same self-sufficiency as life. Life, we will recall, can *become* essential to self-consciousness.²³ Before I had described the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness’ as concerned with the mere claim of exhibiting infinity, i.e., that self-consciousness has not yet “exhibited itself” as infinite “in its own eyes.” Presumably, then, we can understand the needed shift in terms of a realization or manifestation of this initially implicit infinite self-determination that will make this explicit for self-consciousness itself. To understand this movement toward the manifestation of this infinite self-relation, we ought to consult the schematic understanding of this achievement in terms of the infinite emerging out of the finite. It is only in the overcoming of limitations that infinity can be realized, a dynamic which we have connected to desire as a sense of lack and a drive to transcend that limitation. So, while self-consciousness may identify life as infinite in itself--that it transcends its own limitations--there must be sense a in which life at the same time presents precisely the opposite: a *limitation* to self-consciousness, a sense of its own finitude, so that self-consciousness can transcend that limitation and achieve its infinite status for itself.

If self-consciousness is desire, then its object will necessarily present a sense of lack and limitation, even if that object is infinite, and this brings us to seeing the dual significance of life as representing both the infinite and the finite for self-consciousness. Insofar as life exhibits infinity and is seen as constituting satisfaction for self-consciousness, then the self-sufficiency of

²³ Nor do we have to see self-consciousness as what I will label “radically self-sufficient.” Shortly I will argue directly against this view advanced by Fred Neuhouser in which self-consciousness is taken to be, at the outset, radically independent and unconstrained by anything, including life. In contrast I maintain it is more accurate to think of this as a moment in the development of consciousness whereby certain implicit features of knowing can come to be essential in its self-understanding.

life is something self-consciousness seeks to realize for itself. In this way life presents itself as an end for self-consciousness, precisely the self-determination or “self-sameness” it seeks to fully achieve. But as the object of desire, life must also appear as a limitation for self-consciousness, something which it lacks. It is in this way that life stands in opposition to self-consciousness, over and against it, as something appearing “other.” With respect to this side of its relation to life, this object represents finitude for self-consciousness, a limitation it must transcend. Both of these aspects are present simultaneously in life as the object of self-consciousness and this dual nature stems from this infinite object being the object of desire.

Foreshadowing what is to come in the turn to recognition, we should fill out the schematic description of the achievement of infinity for self-consciousness a bit more. We have said that the infinite emerges out of the activity of finite beings and here we have identified life as constituting the limitation and finitude of self-consciousness. As such, self-consciousness must overcome this limitation. But the dual nature of this object for self-consciousness, its representing both the infinite and the finite, speaks to the way in which infinity, genuine infinity, preserves its limitations and the determinacy of the objects that are superseded. A more concrete example of this can be seen in the various kinds of infinite ends we have mentioned, in which the achievement of an infinite end keeps the desire and end distinct from one another and intact. We can anticipate, then, that self-consciousness will find a way to transcend its limitations and supersede life, while at the same time integrating life within itself. This would be a form of self-determination in which something that is a living being emerges as ultimately unbound to life and able sustain itself as, to a certain degree, independent from life.

Another way to think of the direction we are headed is to see self-consciousness as adopting its own form of life, its own way of relating to itself in the world, an idea that entails

seeing knowing as a continuous activity of self-maintenance. This is a significant step for at least two reasons. First we have a major turn in how we conceive of the “object of knowledge.” We have abandoned appealing to a standard or criterion of knowledge, at least in the usual sense, in our understanding of genuine knowledge, or genuine *knowing* (as a verb, not a noun). The object of knowledge is not a determinate and fixed “truth” that consciousness seeks to grasp. Instead, the object of knowledge, life, constitutes an activity of consciousness that is its form of self-determination, or *its way of being*.²⁴ Not only does this indicate that we are thinking of knowing more along the lines of a purposive activity, but it is an activity that is self-differentiating in its determining both what it is to be a subject and what is genuinely real for it. Taking up a way of life can be said to center around a fundamental sense of value and importance. At this point, however, this orientation towards understanding knowledge is just barely emerging, but looking forward, we are beginning to see how an investigation into knowledge can draw us towards thinking that sociality, practices, culture and institutions can be relevant--even essential--to understanding “absolute knowing.” We are in a place to see the traces of notable Hegelian concepts like Ethical Life [*Sittlichkeit*] and Spirit on the horizon and we can see Hegel setting in motion the framework for turning to recognition and the religious Unhappy Consciousness that appear in ‘Self-Consciousness.’

The second point of significance has to do with how this progression of the self-development of knowledge proceeds at this point. If we are to take seriously the idea that knowing is self-determining and is a form of life, this raises the question of how we distinguish knowing from other forms of life. The first step in answering this question would involve separating knowing as a specific form of life from life in general and this is a task that must be

²⁴ Cf. Pippin (1989, pp. 150-151).

worked out in the *self*-development of knowledge, which is to say that knowledge must distinguish itself from life. This much follows from thinking of knowing as a form of life and thereby self-organizing and able to distinguish itself as a determinate activity. Rather than taking Hegel to be offering a metaphysical or anthropological story, this progression can be viewed from the lens of a conceptual development of knowledge towards absolute knowledge in which knowledge is carving out its identity, as it were, by way of altering its conception of itself and separating itself from what it is not.

3. The Radical Self-Sufficiency View

I have been making a case for seeing a fairly rich conception of the relation between self-consciousness and life and I have drawn from both the *Phenomenology* and Hegel's other writings to sketch out the deep connections Hegel sees between these notions. Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the concepts of life and organic unity to Hegel's thought. But there is a further importance in developing these ideas: that understanding the nuance in this relation between self-consciousness and life is instrumental in the transition to recognition. Recognizing this complicated and seemingly divergent relation to life is necessary to understanding why we are forced to posit another self-consciousness. To emphasize this point I want to briefly consider an alternative reading that fails to fully appreciate the opposing aspects of this relation to life that we outlined in the last section. Fred Neuhouser provides a reading that I will call the "radical self-sufficiency view" that, among other things, fails to appreciate the shared infinite structure of self-consciousness and life.²⁵ It is precisely for this reason that, on

²⁵ Neuhouser is not the only commentator to subscribe to a version of the radical self-sufficiency view. Axel Honneth (2012) thinks that self-consciousness is initially a solipsistic position in which it seeks "to assure itself that the entirety of reality it encounters is a product of its own mental activity." (p. 13)

Neuhouser's reading, we lack the resources to find a compelling reason to posit another self-consciousness.

Neuhouser begins by considering self-consciousness's claim to self-sufficiency and he articulates a kind of self-sufficiency that he takes to be a fairly primitive starting point. His focus is on an independence free from restrictions and, in the context of life as our protagonist's object, this independence has to do with one's environment not providing any constraints on one's will.

“The experience of self-consciousness begins with the simplest conception of self-sufficiency a subject can attribute to itself: “I am, on my own, fully self-sufficient. Any object I have before me may appear to exist independently (and thus to place external constraint on my knowledge of will), but I am certain that my object has no independent being (and that I am therefore subject to no such constraints).”²⁶

Given what we have said about infinity and the reflected unity of life in both this chapter and the last, Neuhouser's formulation should raise some concern. What he appears to be describing is the notion of an abstract unity, i.e., a unity that lacks differences, or in this case constraints. The idea of a unity that lacks any sense of limitation—or even purports to—is precisely the empty conception of unity that Hegel takes issue with in both his treatment of negative infinity and natural laws. This notion of radical independence—a self-sufficiency that has no constraints—disregards what our protagonist has learned about the significance of an organic unity and it fails to appreciate that self-consciousness is “essentially a return from out of *otherness*” and for which “the whole breadth of the sensuous world is preserved for it.”²⁷

There certainly ought to be some hesitancy in seeing the initial form of self-consciousness as back-tracking towards a problematic conception of unity that Hegel went to

²⁶ Neuhouser, F ‘Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord’ in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing (2009), pp. 40-41.

²⁷ Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167. Emphasis in the original.

lengths to dismiss in the problem of the inverted world, but this radical notion of self-sufficiency also fails to see that life and subjectivity are closely intertwined.

“The individual desiring subject regards itself as wholly self-determining and self-contained, while it sees the living beings that are the objects of its desire as just the opposite: radically dependent for their existence on other living beings, as well as on their inorganic environment. Life is the realm of need, finitude and dependence, and for this reason life appears to desiring self-consciousness as the antithesis of its own self-sufficiency.”²⁸

Neuhouser is right to notice that life represents finitude for self-consciousness. As we have noted, the object of desire constitutes a lack for the desiring subject and, as such, will always bring about a self-awareness of limitation. But this is only half of the story. There is ample textual evidence that clearly shows Hegel thinks of life as exhibiting *infinite* self-determination. When Hegel first introduces the concept of life at the end of ‘Force and Understanding’ he states that “This simple infinity, or the absolute concept, is to be called the simple essence of life. . .”²⁹ Further, directly after introducing the opposition between self-consciousness and life he goes on to describe “the determination of life” by saying that “the essence is infinity” and that “it is to be characterized as *self-sufficiency* itself.”³⁰ Indeed, Hegel’s short exposition of the characterization of life in the paragraphs preceding the turn to recognition is primarily focused on its infinite self-determination through the sublation of difference in the “determinateness of moments of infinity.” And this feature of life is certainly present to our protagonist, as Hegel states that self-consciousness will “learn from experience about this object’s self-sufficiency.”³¹ Not only does Hegel mark that life is self-sufficient and infinite, even essentially so, but he also clearly states

²⁸ Neuhouser (2009; pp. 41-2).

²⁹ Pinkard, p. 98, par. 162.

³⁰ Pinkard, p. 104, par. 169. Emphasis in the original.

³¹ Pinkard, p. 104, par. 168.

that this self-sufficiency is precisely what self-consciousness sees in life, that it is fully aware of the infinite self-determination of life as the object of desire.

The failure to recognize the infinite self-determination of life reveals its full significance in the turn to recognition. In this transition the main experience that self-consciousness has of life is described as a continuous cycle of desires in which it gains satisfaction in attaining the object of desire only to “re-engender the object as well as the desire.” As desire, self-consciousness is essentially a drive for its object, making its object its primary focus and means to attain satisfaction. In this process Hegel describes self-consciousness as coming to the realization that it is “conditioned by the object.” Neuhouser takes this to demonstrate that “desire is caught in a performative contradiction: in attempting to prove itself self-sufficient, it is compelled to grant an importance to the objects it thinks itself superior to that its self-conception cannot admit.”³² As I will argue in the next section, this formulation in itself is not terribly far off from what Hegel sees as the main impetus to posit another self-consciousness, but with Neuhouser’s reading we are lacking significant context for this statement that would determine another self-consciousness as our object. This performative contradiction, according to Neuhouser, leaves us with the condition that “a satisfied subject cannot avoid depending in some manner on something external to itself” and “that a satisfying object must be one that a subject can depend on in such a way that its dependence does not undermine its claim to self-sufficiency.”³³ This condition is supposed to force us to posit another self-consciousness, an object that one can be dependent upon, yet still exhibit self-sufficiency.³⁴

³² Neuhouser (2009, p. 43).

³³ Neuhouser (2009, p. 45).

³⁴ Neuhouser also finds a second condition that he thinks leads to recognition, that “in order to satisfy a subject, an object must be capable of providing lasting, not merely temporary, satisfaction; it must be able to endure negation (to reflect the value of another) without itself disappearing or being reduced to nothing.” (p. 45) This condition also has difficulties. Neuhouser will go on to say that recognition provides the lasting satisfaction sought, but it is not

Now, while another self-consciousness is certainly consistent with this condition, there is another obvious candidate for an object that exhibits self-sufficiency via its dependence upon the object of desire, namely, *life*. The infinite self-determination of a living thing exhibits its self-sufficiency by way of its dependence upon its environment and other living things for food, shelter and procreation. The central feature of the genuinely infinite is, for Hegel, that of overcoming constraints and dependencies and integrating those limitations in its self-determination. For living things, their dependency upon their environment serves to advance their existence, as those dependencies are moments, as it were, in their life processes. Neuhouser's focus on ascribing to self-consciousness a radical self-sufficiency leads to his neglect to recognize the specifically *infinite* structure of self-determination common to both self-consciousness and living things. Consequently, he articulates a condition that both life and cognitive self-consciousness meet. This being the case, we are left wondering what constitutes the advance to recognition and how we are supposed to articulate a substantial difference between life and self-consciousness. To be clear, it is not so much that Neuhouser is wrong in his formulations of both the "performative contradiction" and the above condition; it is that these formulations omit important details that make positing another self-consciousness a compelling move.

4. The Turn to Recognition

With respect to Neuhouser's view I have argued that, overall, he presents a reading in which the emergence of another self-consciousness is not sufficiently motivated. The criterion he arrives at does not readily specify another self-consciousness as our next object and this is a result of his

clear why natural objects cannot provide lasting satisfaction, such as shelter. Moreover, it is not clear why recognition cannot be temporary. One can surely gain a cognitive status and lose it.

failure to recognize life as itself infinitely self-determining. In contrast, my own reading will present the turn towards recognition and the positing of another self-consciousness as turning on precisely the dynamic of self-consciousness relating itself to an object it sees as self-determining. The transition can be outlined in two steps. First is the adoption of life, this infinitely self-determining object. Insofar as self-consciousness desires life, the satisfaction it achieves is the *satisfaction of living*. As I will show, this progression is clearly marked by Hegel as a movement in which self-consciousness proceeds from being what he calls an immediate unity [*unmittelbaren Einheit*] to a reflected unity [*reflektierte Einheit*]. Taking on this reflected unity of life places desire in a naturalistic context and leads to seeing life--not self-consciousness--as determining desire both in terms of content and occurrence. The second step is recognizing the insight that falls out of this “experience” of self-consciousness. Hegel tells us that the object of desire, life, reveals itself as the “essence of desire,” its “truth.” The experience of life for self-consciousness is the experience of being beholden to life in which its desires appear as instinctual drives. This gives rise to a skeptical objection: that self-consciousness is not self-determining in its relation to life; rather it is the object, life which determines self-consciousness. The strategy, then, is to give into this skeptical objection, admitting that it is in fact the object of desire that is essential to self-consciousness. In light of this, self-consciousness pursues its self-determination by taking *itself* to be its object.³⁵ Thus, the positing of another self-consciousness is the “doubling [*Verdopplung*] of self-consciousness,” and the pursuit of recognition emerges directly out of the failure of self-consciousness to determine itself in its relation to life.

³⁵ While the context of my reading up until now ought to resist this kind of interpretation, it is worth noting that for self-consciousness to take itself to be the object of desire is not to stand in a second order, observational relation to oneself, as is a common understanding of self-consciousness in contemporary literature. As we will see in our discussion of recognition, there is a self-awareness or self-knowing that occurs, but this should be understood along the lines of self-consciously attending to or engaging with another self-conscious being.

In detailing these steps I will first outline the distinction between an immediate unity and a reflected unity and connect these to finite ends and infinite ends, respectively. This will allow us to see a shift in desire that emerges out of the satisfaction self-consciousness experiences in attaining its object. Moving onto the second step, I consider in more detail this experience of self-consciousness being determined by life, rather than the other way around. The operative distinction in this experience is that self-consciousness is subject *to* life rather than the subject *of* a life that is able to *lead* its life.³⁶ Seeing self-consciousness as caught on the former relation to life, our focus is turned toward the object of desire as the main source of determination. Self-consciousness then has an impetus to become “just as much an I as it is an object.”³⁷

To set the stage for this transition we ought to note the starting point of self-consciousness, both how it is characterized in advance to its relation to life and what it seeks to accomplish in relating itself to life. I have said that self-conscious initially is the *mere claim* to be self-determining in the specific sense of exhibiting the structure of infinity. But we have also noted that self-consciousness is described at the outset as a unity. One of the central puzzles of ‘The Truth of Self-Certainty’ that we have shined some light on is how self-consciousness can be a unity, yet still be lacking somehow in the realization of its unity, how it is not yet “for itself” and that its unity still needs to “become essential to self-consciousness.” Given all of Hegel’s foreshadowing of this issue, we should expect to see this movement in the subsequent experience of self-consciousness in its relation to life. Following suit, self-consciousness is initially described as merely an abstract unity, “the motionless tautology of “I am I”” [*bewegungslose Tautologie des: Ich bin Ich*].³⁸ We find Hegel using a number of terms to refer to this abstract or

³⁶ Cf. Pippin (2011).

³⁷ Pinkard p. 108, par. 177.

³⁸ Pinkard, p. 103, par. 167.

immediate unity: the “pure ‘I’” [*reines Ich*], “simple ‘I’” [*einfache Ich*] or “simple universal” [*einfache Allgemeine*].³⁹ This notion ought to be familiar from the empty unity of laws and forces that we found to be incompatible with distinctions they were thought to ground. In the problem of the inverted world and our considerations of infinity we have seen that an abstract unity is problematic because it lacks genuine determinacy. A principle of unity that merely lacks distinctions entirely is a principle that cannot be understood to unify anything. So when Hegel refers to self-consciousness as such a unity, he is signaling that we don’t yet have a fully determinate conception of self-consciousness, a sense of how its unity connects to distinctions so that it is a genuinely unifying principle. The transformational reading suggests a strategy that is quite helpful in understanding such a transition: a unity can appear but not in its fully realized form. This allows for gradations of clarity in the concepts that emerge and can be very helpful in seeing that Hegel is not making large theoretical leaps, but is instead following conceptual developments. For example, as noted, we see in life a kind of primitive "subjectivity" that is built upon moving forward. Thus, we can understand the unity of self-consciousness to appear initially in an impoverished form that can become more developed as we proceed.

In contrast, life exhibits a unity that is infinitely self-determining and it is posited as the object of self-consciousness precisely because it’s self-sufficiency is seen as lending it genuine determinacy: it manifests itself and gives unity to the distinctions of its manifestations. Life is an example of a unity that is not merely abstract and immediate. It is a dynamic of unification in which its unity is essentially interdependent with the distinctions it unifies.

³⁹ The last term “simple universal” is not as straightforward as the others in indicating an immediate unity. I will identify the “genus” [*Gattung*] as typically referring to a reflected unity in a moment, but Hegel sometimes uses these terms to signify a unity in general, applying to both an immediate and a reflected unity. These terms admit of a fluidity to allow for the progression from an impoverished instance to a genuine instance, much in the same way I have shown “infinity” can be used to refer to negative infinity and genuine infinity and still mark a progression from the former to the latter.

“Thus the simple substance of life is the splitting-up of itself into shapes and at the same time the dissolution of these existent differences; and the dissolution of the splitting up is just as much a splitting up and a forming of members.” (Miller p. 108, par. 171)

It is helpful here to have a sense of just what Hegel means to refer to when he mentions the “existent differences” and “forming of members.” Life creates various kinds of distinctions: between a living thing and its environment, between the different organs in a living individual and between living individuals of the same species. The reference to the “differences” and “members” is intentionally abstract in order to refer to the various ways in which a living thing creates such divisions, but it will be helpful to give a more detailed view of the various dynamics that Hegel sees in life.

Drawing primarily from Hegel’s later works, Thomas Khurana⁴⁰ provides a helpful summary of some of the central features of Hegel’s understanding of the self-production of life that is more detailed than the one I give here. He identifies three processes: (1) the *process of shape*, (2) the *process of assimilation*, and (3) the *genus-process*. The process of shape is the reciprocal part-whole relation we see in living organisms. A tree produces its leaves so that they take in sunlight and the leaves in turn take in that sunlight helping to produce the tree as a whole. This general feature of living organisms reveals them as self-producing via their distinct parts: the organism as a whole produces its parts and its parts produce the organism as a whole. This is one sense in which life is understood as a process of forming members and dissolving these distinctions. The process of assimilation is paradigmatically understood as the process of metabolism, a living thing’s ability to take in bits of its environment in order to sustain itself. It marks an “existent difference” between a living thing and its environment that is “dissolved” in consumption. As for the genus process, Khurana describes it as the process which “unifies these

⁴⁰ Khurana, T. ‘Life and Autonomy: Forms of Self-Determination in Kant and Hegel’ in *The Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, Khurana eds. (2003)

two relations insofar as it concerns the way in which what is living relates to itself in relating to its other.” The genus process not only concerns the process of reproduction—the forming of living individuals—but it also identifies the entire life-form of a living thing. The genus determines the kind of thing a living individual is, informing and shaping how that thing is self-organizing in its process of shape and assimilation, e.g., it dictates which organs it has, how they are used and which items it can metabolize.

The central point to emphasize is that these distinctions are *constitutive* of the *unity* of a living thing. A healthy living thing resists atrophy and maintains its existence as distinct from its environment and maintaining the separation between organs and their functions is essential to the perpetuation of a living organism as a whole. Thus, these distinctions that arise from the activities of life are “dissolved” in that they serve to sustain the unity of life, the living organism as whole. Life exemplifies the infinite self-determination we have been concerned with in that it is a unity that is not only compatible with certain distinctions, but is a unity that is inseparable from these distinctions.

In the sense that self-consciousness desires to adopt life, or its own form of life, then, it seeks to achieve this status of being what Hegel calls a “reflected unity.” Life manifests itself in the above processes of forming distinctions and development of itself as a unity and Hegel spends a fairly significant amount of time detailing—in a rather opaque stretch of text—his movement at a relatively high level of abstraction. The main point Hegel thinks we should take away from his discussion is that in understanding the self-determination of life in a full sense, there is a movement from grasping life as initially an immediate unity and then seeing its reflected structure. It is worth quoting him at length on this point.

“Since we started from the first immediate unity and returned back through the moments of formation and of process to the unity of both these moments, and thus back again to

the original simple substance, the *reflected* unity is different from the first. Contrasted with that *immediate* unity, or that unity expressed as a [mere] *being*, this second is the *universal* unity which contains all these moments as superseded [*aufgehoben*] within itself. It is the simple genus which, in the movement of Life itself, does not *exist for itself qua* this *simple* determination; on the contrary, in this result, Life points to something other than itself, viz. to consciousness, for which Life exists as this unity, or as genus.” (Miller, p. 109, par. 172)

In coming to understand life as a reflected unity there is a conceptual development that parallels the development we saw in the concept of infinity. The unity of life appears at first as an immediate unity, even if we implicitly grasp that it ought to be understood as infinitely self-determining and not as a mere abstract unity. It is by way of tracing out its development and seeing its developmental process giving rise to distinctions and their “dissolution” that we are able to grasp it as genuinely self-determining, i.e., as forming a unity via its distinctions. This reflected unity that we come to grasp, Hegel labels as the “genus” [*Gattung*]. The genus is the underlying unity of a living thing which is reflected in its life processes, not only within an individual, but also between individuals. Foreshadowing recognition slightly, we can note that the genus is the “universal unity” that binds individual living things as sharing a common “essence.”⁴¹ But the significance of the way life “points” to consciousness is that this reflected unity is present as the object of desire for self-consciousness. The achievement of satisfaction for self-consciousness is to achieve the status of a reflected unity for itself, i.e., its infinite self-determination. Thus, the encounter with life is one that will entail a movement for self-consciousness from an abstract unity to realizing itself as a reflected unity: “In its experience,

⁴¹ In the *Science of Logic* (p. 686; 12.189)—and also in the *Encyclopedia on the Philosophy of Nature*—the significance of the genus to the relationship between individuals is much more explicit and refers to reproduction more specifically. There he outlines a movement in which the urge of the individual to perpetuate its own existence is sublated in its relation to another through reproduction.

which is now up for examination, this abstract object will, to itself, become enriched and will contain the development we have seen in life.”⁴²

To avoid losing our grip on how this concern with life is relevant to our overall task of reaching absolute knowing, we ought to recall how our understanding of knowledge at this point in the text turns on grasping it as a reflected unity. When Hegel tells us that “consciousness of an ‘other,’ of an object as such, is indeed itself necessarily *self-consciousness*” he is marking the transition toward grasping knowledge of objects as also exhibiting self-knowledge.⁴³ To know an object is to have an awareness of oneself as standing in a cognitive relation to that object. Knowing exhibits a distinction between subject and object, a parsing out between subjective and objective elements of cognition that is also transcended or overcome in grasping the object. This is precisely the dynamic Hegel is getting at with his initial characterizations of self-consciousness as “the reflection out of the sensuous and perceived world,” in which “otherness” is for it a “moment” in its self-relation.⁴⁴ Thus, the structure of a reflected unity is precisely what we need to see exhibited in knowledge and our overall project—the self-development of knowledge—turns its focus toward seeing itself as infinitely self-determining.

Before proceeding to the experience of self-consciousness pursuing the satisfaction of life, it will be helpful to first make a connection between desire and the stages of a unity we have identified. In the last chapter I pointed out that there is good reason to think Hegel is concerned with desire as it applies to infinite ends. Corresponding to this we can see that a desire for infinite ends is operative in the drive to realize a reflected unity. We have already identified life as an infinite end. What is specific about infinite ends is that they do not exhaust the desire to

⁴² Pinkard p. 106, par. 173.

⁴³ Pinkard p. 100, par. 164.

⁴⁴ Pinkard p. 103, par. 167.

attain them. The desire to live is perfectly compatible with, and even essential to, living. The satisfaction of an infinite end such as living *preserves* the distinction between desire and its object and in this sense this satisfaction represents the realization of a unity that is reflected through its distinctions. With desire operating within the context of an immediate unity, however, its satisfaction consists in achieving a finite end. Desire is a felt lack giving rise to a distinction between itself and its object. Achieving the satisfaction of a finite end entails the termination of that desire or felt lack. This feature of finite ends maps onto the notion of a unity that is incompatible with distinctions, or an immediate unity. The unity formed in the satisfaction of a finite end precludes the distinction present in desire. It is a unity that is the absence of distinctions and does not involve their preservation.

In the experience of self-consciousness we will see a development of determination for self-consciousness, a movement from being an abstract unity toward being a reflected unity, which will present the satisfaction of a finite end initially and then the satisfaction of an infinite end. Hegel describes first a sense of satisfaction that *is* achieved and then an explanation of why this satisfaction reveals that self-consciousness is unable to “sublate” its object. We will recall that life is for self-consciousness a “doubled object” having the significance of both finitude and the infinite. The satisfaction attained, then, also has a dual significance. The first part has to do with self-consciousness overcoming the limitation or lack that it feels as desire.

“Self-consciousness is therefore only certain of itself through sublating this other, which, to itself, exhibits itself as self-sufficient life. Self-consciousness is *desire*. Certain of the nullity of this other, it posits *for itself* this nullity as its truth. . .” (Pinkard, p. 107, par. 174)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For the sake of the continuity of discussion I have omitted the following phrase which may seem to be of importance: “it destroys [*vernichtet*] the self-sufficient object, and it thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as *true* certainty, as the sort of certainty which in its eyes has come to be in an *objective manner*.” (par. 174) One might think that Hegel’s reference to the “destruction” of this object is telling, specifically that it provides evidence against my reading and indicates that Hegel does not think of the relation to life as one of forming a unity with it. In a moment I will address the similarities to consumption, a life process we have already mentioned, but I want to caution against putting too much emphasis on this term. Judith Butler (1987), for instance, makes the rather radical

Life represents finitude or limitation insofar as it is the object of desire, an object that self-consciousness lacks, and the opposition between self-consciousness and life rests on this felt lack. And as we have pointed out, self-consciousness sees itself at the outset as only an abstract unity, understood merely as the lack of distinctions. Self-consciousness, we might say, is at this stage *only* desire. The realization of its unity, then, would amount to nothing other than self-consciousness ridding itself of any distinction between itself and its object, positing the “nullity” of its other and exemplifying the pursuit of a finite end.

The second half of the dual significance of attaining this object is that this satisfaction shifts the desire into the pursuit of an infinite end. Self-consciousness experiences the *satisfaction of living* and adopts life as its (purported) form of self-determination:

“In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really for that reason that it produces the object again, and the desire as well.” (Miller, p. 109, par. 175)

As initially an immediate unity, self-consciousness collapses the opposition between itself and life, but the result of this is that desire is placed within the context of life, a context in which it is pursuing an infinite end. This desire for life is something that is not extinguished, but perpetuated: “it re-engenders the object again, and the desire as well.”⁴⁶ Living involves a continuous striving to perpetuate the satisfaction of living and, therefore, exhibits a cyclical process in which a distinction between the desire to live and the aim of living is maintained. The

claim that self-consciousness seeks to consume all life. But even without subscribing to such an extreme view, there are at least two important bits of text that strongly suggest we need to provide substantial context to Hegel’s use of “destroy.” First is that Hegel quickly turns to say both that self-consciousness is “thus unable by way of its negative relation to the object to sublimate it” and that it finds itself to be “conditioned by the object.” Both are quite difficult to square with the idea that this object is completely destroyed, as we would want to know what exactly self-consciousness was unable to do, and how it can be conditioned by an object that no longer exists.

⁴⁶ Pinkard, p. 107, par. 175.

result of finding satisfaction in this infinite object is that self-consciousness appears to take on the status of a reflected unity that preserves the distinction between desire and its object.

This experience of adopting an infinite end and the corresponding shift of desire, however, results in self-consciousness failing to see itself as fully self-determining. The result is that self-consciousness as desire finds itself to be determined by, or at least dependent upon, its object. This marks the second step in the transition to recognition. In the midst of this transition, Hegel tells us that self-consciousness is “absolutely for itself” [*absolut für sich*], which indicates something important about the unity of self-consciousness *becoming* essential to it. It is not simply that its unity is essential, but rather that it has a part in *bringing about* this unity as that which is essential to it. Given the current context in which we have identified living as an essential infinite end, we can understand self-consciousness to be at the outset already committed to the idea that it must somehow determine its own infinite end. This is to say that self-consciousness must be responsible for the infinite ends that characterize it essentially. The aim of life as the object of desire is to establish itself as a reflected unity and the source of its own unity, or, to put it differently, to take on *its own* form of life. It is precisely this status of being “absolutely for itself” that it fails to achieve in its relation to life. In adopting life as its infinite end, self-consciousness finds itself “conditioned by the object” of life and sees that “It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of desire.”⁴⁷ Gaining the satisfaction of living, self-consciousness transcends the initial limitation imposed by its desire for its object, but this satisfaction gives rise to a new sense of limitation or finitude in which self-consciousness is dependent upon life and beholden to its impulses as a living thing.

⁴⁷ Miller, p. 109, par. 175.

Robert Pippin makes a helpful distinction here between being subject *to* life, on the one hand, and being the subject *of* a life, on the other.⁴⁸ In the former we have a picture of what might be referred to as an “animal life” wherein a being is bound by a fixed set of species imperatives. Such instinctual drives appear as determining, to a certain extent, the pursuits of such a being. With an animal life we can think of its activities as determined by its nature such that the individual animal lacks an ability to transcend its natural constraints. The way in which self-consciousness is dependent upon its object and conditioned by life, it experiences itself as limited by such natural constraints and driven to meet the infinite ends of the life processes it has adopted. This evinces a lack of self-determination and reveals the paradoxical result of self-consciousness finding itself to lack a sense of self-determination in adopting a form of self-determination. The idea of being a subject *of* a life or *leading* a life, however, is the idea of a living thing that has attitudes that mediate its natural drives to various degrees. A subject of a life is a living being that values or doesn’t value its life, a being that may choose to diet or not to procreate and even may be willing to sacrifice her own life. Life is a *part*—albeit a quite fundamental one—of such a being’s existence. It is this relation to life that is implicit in the claim of self-consciousness to be infinitely self-determining: that it transcends the limitations of life and is not entirely bound to its nature while still preserving these limitations in the form of integrating its natural existence. For self-consciousness to establish its own form of life and be genuinely “for itself,” it would seem that it must achieve the status of leading a life.

At this point we can anticipate the social relation of recognition as playing an important role in achieving this status of leading a life and, moreover, we can begin to see its connection to

⁴⁸ Pippin (2011; pp. 66-67). While I take this overall distinction from Pippin and find my use of it here to be, on the whole, consistent with his formulation, some of my remarks differ somewhat from the points he makes with respect to this distinction.

various features of the subsequent pursuit of recognition: the “struggle of life and death” between the potential master and servant in the attempt to prove he is not “shackled to life” and the servant’s ability to hold his “desire in check.” But thus far we have merely posited this transcendence of life in order to grasp more fully the problem self-consciousness discovers. We have yet to articulate how the experience of this lack of self-determination results in self-consciousness thinking it *must* posit another self-consciousness.

To see the necessity of this transition we ought to reflect on what exactly is the source of this lack of self-determination. We have said that self-consciousness finds itself to be subject to life and dependent on its object, rather than exhibiting its own independence. Hegel tells us that not only is the object of desire, life, “the essence of desire,” but also that self-consciousness has come to see this as the “truth” of this experience. Hegel is here signaling the emergence of our new “object,” a new sense of what is essential to self-consciousness that follows from its failure to achieve the full sense of self-determination it seeks. We can formulate the main problem leading to our new object in terms of a skeptical objection: while self-consciousness claims to be self-determining in its desirous relation to life, it appears that it is the object that determines the subject, rather than the subject determining itself. Even when we grant that self-consciousness is understood as gaining the satisfaction of living, it is still beholden to its natural existence, conditioned by life, and driven by its natural impulses as they continually arise. As with the previous transition to self-consciousness, the transformative reading instructs us not to see our protagonist as outright rejecting this objection; rather the strategy is to accept this skeptical objection and take it to identify the next step in its progression. If it is the object that determines the subject, then for self-consciousness to determine itself, self-consciousness must be the object of desire.

Certainly self-consciousness does not take a stance toward itself as a second order attitude in desiring itself. Neither is it the case that self-consciousness abandons the idea that it is a subject, positing itself as *only* an object, whatever that might amount to. Instead self-consciousness posits *another self-consciousness* as its object. In doing so, self-consciousness becomes the object of desire in two ways. First is that the object is identical to itself in terms of its kind. The object is another desirous being seeking to transcend its dependency upon life, and, thus, is identified under the same essential features. This bears an important similarity to how self-consciousness previously related to life, in the sense that Hegel thinks that in life we see the "beginnings of subjectivity" in which self-consciousness sees its own form of self-determination in life. But with recognition this is more fully an identification of self-consciousness with its object and a development of the first relation with life. Second, as an immediate consequence of the first point, the first self-consciousness becomes the object of desire for the opposing self-consciousness. Just after Hegel famously claims that "*self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*"⁴⁹ he summarizes the three moments which bring completion to this transition. The first two moments briefly outline the first step we traced above: that of self-consciousness being "a pure undifferentiated 'I'" at first and then finding itself caught in the activity of an "absolute mediation" revealing itself to be dependent upon its object. In the last moment Hegel summarizes the second step outlined above:

"But the truth of that certainty is instead a doubled reflection, the doubling of self-consciousness. There is an object for self-consciousness which in itself posits its otherness, or which posts the difference as a nullity and is therein a self-sufficient object." (Pinkard pp. 107-8, par. 176)

This doubling of self-consciousness in which self-consciousness posits another self-consciousness as its object is the direct result of self-consciousness coming to see both that it is

⁴⁹ Pinkard p. 107, par. 175. Italics in the original

dependent upon the object of desire and that it must be self-determining via this dependency. Put differently, seeing that the object is the “essential” source of determination, self-consciousness places itself in this position of being the object. Desiring another self-consciousness has the significance of making the first self-consciousness an object of desire as well: it is the object of the other self-consciousness. Thus, for both self-conscious beings in this relation each is “just as well an I as it is an object.”⁵⁰

5. Recognition and the Appearance of Self-Consciousness

Naturally this move in the text gives rise to a few questions: In what sense is another self-conscious being *desired*? And, what is the significance of self-consciousness being the object of desire for another self-conscious being? The answer to the former is, of course, that one desires the recognition [*Anerkennung*] of the other. And we know, looking forward, that the resulting relation is a *struggle* for recognition, a relation between two beings with the opposing interests of trying to gain the recognition of the other. A great deal can surely be said about recognition that would take us far off course.⁵¹ For current purposes, however, the central feature of this social relation is that it reveals self-consciousness as able to achieve the reflected unity it sees in life, but in a way that it is grounded on the activity of self-consciousness itself. In recognition self-consciousness finds a way to achieve its unity via its distinction between itself and its other in a way that preserves this distinction and be “for itself a genus.” In this section I will outline two

⁵⁰ Pinkard p. 108, par. 177. This point is also quite clear a couple of paragraphs down: “Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness: it has come *out of itself*. This has a two-fold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself in another being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self.” (Miller, p. 111, par. 179)

⁵¹ The concern with recognition spans much further than Hegel’s works, including German Idealism in general, ethics, social and political philosophy and social ontology. A few representative works are Honneth, A. *The Struggle for Recognition*, J. Anderson trans. Polity Press (1995), Heikki, I. and Laitinen, A. *Recognition and Social Ontology*, Brill, Hotei Publishing (2011) and Schmidt am Busch, H. and Zurn, C. *The Philosophy of Recognition*, Lexington Books (2010)

distinctions that are constitutive of the reflected unity exhibited in recognition. With these in hand we will be able to see clearer the significance of recognition as a mode of self-consciousness appearing to itself. Recognition provides a way in which subjectivity has a determinate manifestation, making a significant step towards knowing as a form of self-knowing.

There are two main distinctions to note that represent the reflected unity that self-consciousness is able to achieve (at least preliminarily) in its relation to another self-consciousness. The most pronounced one is the division between the two self-conscious beings. The immediate consequence of positing another self-consciousness is that each posits the “otherness” of the opposing desirous being. Insofar as we have two beings each desiring the recognition of the other, we have an opposition between the two in which each poses a *challenge* to the other. As with life, this new object initially represents a sense of finitude and lack for self-consciousness. However, in contrast with life, the limitation imposed in recognition in terms of the opposition between the two self-conscious beings arises out of the mutual *participation* of both. It is in engaging in such a challenge and taking the other as a challenger the distinction between the two is established. At the same time this distinction binds them as having a common end. There is only a genuine challenge if both individuals endorse the aim in question and see the other as an obstacle to achieve that aim. So the division between these two self-conscious beings in their struggle against one another is constitutive of their social unity. The pursuit of recognition, even in the primitive and violent form we see resulting in the enslaving of other self-consciousness, evinces a reflected unity, a unity that gives rise to distinctions and is self-realizing via these distinctions.

The main obstacle our protagonist encountered in taking life as its object was its inability to establish a reflected unity in which self-consciousness is genuinely for itself and the

significance of this recognitive relation is that it is grounded on self-consciousness itself. We have noted that each participant must engage in this confrontation for it to constitute a challenge to the other, involving the emergence of a distinction between the participants that is at the same time an endorsement of the mutually sought end. The reflected unity—here in terms of social bond that is also an opposition—is grounded on the endorsement of this end by the participants. To sharpen this point we can make use of Robert Brandom’s autonomy thesis:

“In this distinctive sense, rules get their normative force, come to govern our doings, only in virtue of our own attitudes. One is genuinely responsible only for that for which one *takes* responsibility; one is genuinely committed only to that to which one has committed oneself.”⁵²

While we have not been talking about full-fledged “norms” or “rules,” and are merely outlining the basic features of a recognitive relation as it arises in the text, the autonomy thesis puts a finger on how self-consciousness has a hand in determining what is essential to itself. With recognition we see how the activity of self-consciousness, i.e., its participation in the pursuit of recognition, is itself an endorsement of recognition as something of value. By taking up the challenge presented by the other participant and seeking to “supersede the other,” self-consciousness is (however implicitly) bringing that end to bear upon itself. This is an instance of positing an end that is essential to oneself while seeing that end as grounded upon the participants themselves. Endorsing the end of recognition is to take responsibility for that end “becoming essential” to oneself and we can see a more robust sense in which—in this social relation of recognition—a self-conscious being is “absolutely for itself.”

Out of this division between these two self-conscious beings and the acknowledgement that this division is grounded on their own activity, there is a second distinction that arises. The challenge between the two self-conscious beings admits of a significant transformation in the

⁵² Brandom, R. *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard University Press (2002), p. 219.

distinction between subject and object. In the autonomy thesis Brandom articulates the responsibility the subject takes on in making a commitment to the norm being endorsed: a distinction between being *genuinely* responsible to that norm and merely *taking* that norm as binding for the subject. This speaks to an understanding of a subject-object distinction as it appears in a recognitive social relation, a distinction between what *seems* to be the case with respect to how one views oneself as being in the world and how one *actually is* in the world. Hegel points this out by saying that each self-consciousness seeks to “prove his worth” to both himself and the other⁵³ in “sublating” the other self-consciousness in order to achieve a new sense of certainty. The endorsement of the struggle for recognition is a *claim* to be a recognized being. The challenge posed by the other self-conscious being gives a sense of determinacy to this endorsement and reveals a manifestation of the subject-object relation therein. In this social relation one is held responsible by the other for one’s claim to recognition, creating a division between this claim being a *mere* claim and it being a true claim. We then see an appearance-reality distinction emerging out of the activity of self-consciousness that is both grounded on self-consciousness itself and is aimed at achieving a “return out of otherness” in which “the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it.”⁵⁴

I have outlined two distinctions: the distinction between the two self-conscious beings and a subject-object distinction between what each self-consciousness takes itself to be and what each self-consciousness actually is. As we should expect, given that these are divisions that are constitutive of the reflective unity of self-consciousness these are really aspects of one and the same phenomenon of recognition. This is why Hegel claims that:

⁵³ *sich selbst und einander . . . bewähren.*

⁵⁴ Miller p. 105, par. 167.

“Self-Consciousness is *in* and *for itself* while and as a result of its being in and for itself for an other; i.e. it is only as a recognized being.” [*ein Anerkanntes*] (Pinkard, p. 108, par. 178)

The designation of self-consciousness being “in and for itself” denotes the subject-object division that emerges in the cognitive relation to another self-consciousness. In the face of the challenge of another, there is a distinction between what each participant claims to be and what each participant really is in itself. With this relation to another self-consciousness, then, this distinction is part of the appearance of self-consciousness, the way in which self-consciousness shows up in reality, not only for the other, but for itself. The appearance of self-consciousness has an essential subjective dimension to it.

We will recall that in life Hegel sees an implicit self-awareness and a primitive sense of subjectivity. The activities of a living thing are essentially self-referring. Thus, in life self-consciousness sees something like itself. And life, as itself exhibiting a reflected unity, reveals itself as manifest. It is an appearance of its self-reference as this self-reference propels its striving to exist. With recognition, however, the object is not merely *like* self-consciousness, the object *is* itself. In this mode of relating to another self-consciousness it adopts its own reflected unity and, as such, gives itself its own form of manifestation, its own appearance to itself and the other. The kind of unity exhibited in the struggle for recognition is born out of the activity of self-consciousness. What recognition allows for is a way to understand consciousness to be its own object, but not by seeing itself as a fixed object to be observed. In recognition self-consciousness is essentially active and self-determining. Insofar as we understand genuine knowledge to be both self-determining and self-knowledge, recognition provides a key step towards marrying these two notions.

Servitude and the Conceptual Thought of ‘Self-Consciousness’

Chapter 4

It is a curious fact of Hegel scholarship that while a great deal of attention is paid to the so-called “Master-Slave dialectic” and the emergence of recognition, there is not nearly as much concern with the subsequent turn to stoicism in the *Phenomenology*.¹ While Hegel’s treatment of stoicism is somewhat brief, the lack of emphasis on it is curious because it is at this point where the previous turbulent shifts through desire, life and recognition finally bring us to “the pure movement of consciousness which *thinks*, or free self-consciousness.”² Stoicism is the first shape of consciousness of the *Phenomenology* that Hegel describes as something that “moves itself” in concepts. This characterization of stoicism as a shape of consciousness specifically concerned with conceptual thought moves us into much more familiar territory with respect to Hegel’s project of conducting an “examination of the reality of cognition.” At the outset of ‘The Freedom of Self-Consciousness’ we not only arrive at an understanding of knowledge that looks much more like self-determining Spirit than anything before it, but we also arrive at this position in a way that is informed by the unique path leading up to this shape of consciousness.

¹ While I think it is certainly difficult to find the same quantity of literature of on the turn to stoicism and the ‘Freedom of Self-Consciousness’ as there is on desire and ‘Lordship and Bondage’, there is also more focus on the latter in interpretations of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. Some representative works include Brandom (2002 and 2019), Butler (1987), Honneth (2010) and Kojève (1969).

² Pinkard, p. 117, par. 197.

Painting this transition with broad strokes, there is good reason to think that the emergence of stoicism marks a significant turning point in the self-development of consciousness and Hegel marks its significance in the following way.

“However, stoicism is the freedom which always immediately leaves servitude and returns back into the *pure universality* of thought. As a universal form of world-spirit [*allgemeine Form des Weltgeistes*], it can only come on the scene during a time of universal fear and servitude but which is also a time of universal cultural formation [*allgemeinen Bildung*] that has raised culturally formative activity all the way up to the heights of thinking.” (Pinkard, pp 118-9, par. 199)

There are two aspects of this transition that Hegel brings attention to. On the one hand this transition involves “immediately leaving” servitude and, on the other, this same movement is a turn towards “the pure universality of thought” and exemplifies “formative activity all the way up to the heights of thinking.” The first aspect has been discussed in the literature and can be given an intuitive gloss. There is something of a classic moral that is often taken away from this portion of text and the master-slave relation therein: the master does not see the servant as an equal and is therefore unsatisfied with the recognition he gets from the servant, while the servant is paradoxically successful in achieving a degree of freedom, i.e. the servant “comes to an intuition of self-sufficient being *as its own self*” through his labor.³ Alexandre Kojève describes stoicism as a kind of “slave ideology,” a way in which leading a life of forced servitude can involve turning away from one’s material bondage and looking within, as it were, for one’s freedom.⁴ This certainly gives a plausible and intuitive description of a retreat or inward turn away from servitude, but it gives little to go on regarding the positive aspect of this transition. The achievement of conceptual thinking is something Hegel clearly emphasizes and it seems essential to not only stoicism, but the remaining shapes of self-consciousness as well, namely,

³ Pinkard, p. 115, par. 195.

⁴ Kojève (1969; p. 53).

skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness.⁵ With respect to this advance, it is much less clear how the lack of mutual recognition and the labor of the servant are the key elements that give rise to this “universal form of world-spirit.”

The reading I present here gives special focus to the second of the above aspects of this transition and yet again uses the insights of the transformative reading to see this development. I argue that the one-sided and unequal form of recognition in the master-servant relation results in the establishment of a kind of authority that is viewed by the servant as absolute and is made actual in his labor.⁶ Contrary to commentators that take the servant to view the master’s authority as contingent, and thereby prompting him to posit an alternative, genuine or universal, authority in its place, I understand the servant’s appreciation for an absolute authority to follow directly from his experience of this impoverished form of recognition. In recognizing the master’s demands as absolute, the labor of the servant takes on the significance of meeting a standard of correctness that is viewed as absolute by the servant. This reading both focuses on the experience and outlook of servant’s position and provides a way to see conceptual thought to emerge as a transformation of the failure to attain mutual recognition in the master-servant relation. Moreover, we will see an understanding of conceptual thought as a self-conscious way of life that is socially and practically embedded. Laboring to meet the demands of a “master” or “lord,” the servant’s role requires that he has “a mind of his own” in that his activities center around holding himself to what can be identified as a universal sense of “truth” and “right.”

⁵ Kojève (ibid) does take note of these further shapes of consciousness, but he focuses on the slave’s self-determination as the main takeaway and see these as “series of ideologies” that must be progressed through before “realizing freedom.”

⁶ One can find a few different translations for titles given to the participants in this narrative: “*Herr*” and “*Knecht*.” Perhaps the most well-known pair of terms is “Master” and “Slave,” but, some commentators use the terms “Lord” and “Bondsman.” Following Pinkard’s translation I will by and large use “master” and “servant,” with a few exceptions. But as I will consider some quotes from different commentators that have adopted different translations it should be noted that the different terms for “*Herr*” will be treated as interchangeable and similarly with the different terms for “*Knecht*.”

Sections one and two provide some important context for understanding the transition to stoicism. Section one provides a brief review of how Hegel's turn towards self-consciousness turns on the concept of infinite self-determination and how this brings us to the moment of a "life and death struggle" [*Kampf auf Leben und Tod*] for recognition. In section two I consider how the servant is cast as the essential member of the master-slave relation and show a parallel between this relation and the previous relation between self-consciousness and life. Section three considers what I call the contingency reading of the transition to stoicism put forth by Terry Pinkard and Fred Neuhouser. This interpretive strategy, I argue, subscribes to the view that the turn to universal principles is prompted by the servant recognizing the master's authority as contingent and not absolute. After providing textual and philosophical problems with this view, I present my own reading in section four. There I argue that the servant views the master's authority as absolute and in section five I consider how this leads to the *Bildung* of the servant "all the way up to the heights of thinking."

1. A Life and Death Struggle

No doubt Hegel's discussion in the self-consciousness chapter of the *Phenomenology* seems to veer far off the beaten path when it comes to philosophical inquiries into epistemology and self-consciousness. This sentiment is especially pronounced when it comes to the dramatic moment of conflict between two self-conscious beings.

"The relation of both self-consciousnesses is thus determined in such a way that it is through a life and death struggle that each *proves its worth* to itself, and that both *prove their worth* to each other. -They must engage in this struggle, for each must elevate its self-certainty of *existing for itself* to truth, both in the other and in itself." (Pinkard, p. 111, par. 187)

While this appears as a rather striking claim, cast in what might be viewed as somewhat indulgent language, the context leading up to this point reveals this moment as important to Hegel's progression towards self-determining Spirit. Indeed, the dire nature of this conflict is integral to this struggle for recognition. There are two aspects to this passage that require a frame of reference. First is to note why it is important that each self-consciousness is here risking his *life* in this struggle. The previous object of self-consciousness was life and, thus, putting one's life on the line in this struggle represents an important advance from the last shape of consciousness.⁷ Second is the dynamic and aim of *proving* one's worth. This speaks to the aim of gaining recognition, but it also refers to the character of self-awareness attributed to the participants in this struggle. Each is claiming a status of having a kind of "worth" that one must prove to *oneself*, in addition to the other participant. This feature of the passage both draws from Hegel's understanding of recognition as a self-conscious orientation and puts in place an important component in the anticipated failure to attain mutual recognition.

In the last two chapters we have been considering the details of Hegel's account up to this point. Here I want to provide a somewhat abstracted gloss on the relation between self-consciousness and life. The reason being that in following the complicated moves Hegel makes in the preceding pages of the *Phenomenology*—a stretch of text that is just as important as it is difficult—the broader picture of the relevance of this progression can be easily lost. By way of review of what has come before I will address the above two points and give the needed context for the struggle for recognition, clearing the way to consider the resulting social relation of master and servant in the next section.

⁷ And an advance that is easily accounted for on the transformative view. The integration of concerns with life and desire at this point in the text makes a great deal of sense if we understand there to be a developmental progression at work, building upon what has come before in 'Self-Consciousness.'

At the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness’ the first “immediate” object of self-consciousness is life. With this turn to life as our focal point there is a substantial shift in how we are understanding knowledge and one that requires recognizing changes in how we are understanding both the terms of the subject-object relation of knowing and this relation itself. Considering first the object of knowledge, this turn to life seen in the transition from ‘Consciousness’ to ‘Self-Consciousness’ carries with it a change in what we understand to be the fundamental organizing structure of reality and the focal point of this shift is the relation between unity and difference. In ‘Consciousness’ we saw that understanding nature as, in and of itself, ordered according to natural laws proved to be untenable because the operative notion of unity that natural laws exhibit is what Hegel understands to be an abstract or empty unity. Such a unity is one that is the absence of difference and thereby precludes the very differences among phenomena they are purported to bring order to. In this way the motion and flux of objects could not be explained by appealing to natural laws. In ‘Self-Consciousness’ life is posited in order to overcome the previous problematic conception of unity, as life exhibits an organic unity: an activity of unification through differences. The divisions between living things and their environment and between their various parts are constitutive of an organism’s determinacy and the unifying activity of life processes. Life exhibits what Hegel calls “infinity” and he describes life as a “universal self-sufficient nature,” which is “both every difference as well as their sublatedness.”⁸ The turn to life is a turn to understanding reality as a self-organizing whole that is interdependent upon the differences among its various manifestations.

This shift from seeing natural scientific laws as providing the underlying unity of phenomena to the organic unity of life can be understood, first, as a shift in what we take to be

⁸ Pinkard p. 107, par. 175 and p. 98, par. 162, respectively.

the central, or most basic, constituent of reality. In other words, we might say there is a shift in how we understand nature: from a mechanistic or Newtonian world view to one that views nature as centered around life. This is not to say that all things are living things, just that living things take priority when it comes to the intelligibility and determinacy of objects. We can fill out such a position by considering two points. First is that living things are responsible for their determinacy in ways that inanimate objects are not. As we have seen in the last two chapters, it is essential to living things that they separate *themselves* from their environment and into different parts, whereas we can think of inanimate objects as divided accidentally in various ways. Second, we can understand inanimate objects as divided according to the needs and uses of them with respect to living beings. This is to see the determinacy of inanimate objects as parasitic on the self-determining activities of living beings and see life as taking priority in grasping reality.

Viewing nature in this way, however, is not only a claim about the *object* of self-consciousness; it also brings together a number of elements with respect to how we are understanding the *subject* and how it relates to life as its object. Specifically, this new object steers us towards the idea that there is an identity of subject and object, that we are venturing toward the notion that “substance is essentially subject.”⁹ The dynamic of the object of knowledge, life, exhibits the same structure of knowing itself in that life is self-referring in its self-determining activity. The life process exhibits a living thing in its striving to further its own existence, as life is essentially self-moving and self-organizing, exhibiting an essential reference to itself in such activities. Hegel even goes so far to say in his later writings that “in the living

⁹ Pinkard p. 16, par. 25.

being the object is suddenly changed into something *subjective*” and that “consciousness discovers that it is itself the essential being of the object.”¹⁰

With life exhibiting a kind of self-determination and subjectivity, self-consciousness sees itself as (initially) part of nature. Self-Consciousness understands itself as exemplifying the same infinite self-determination as other living beings and thereby places itself within nature. We are understanding knowing as an activity of a living being, a “living self-consciousness,” that is within the world and relates itself to the natural world similarly to other living beings. This somewhat schematic presentation of the relation between self-consciousness and life, however, can only be the very beginning of the story. We cannot understand self-consciousness to simply be identified with life, as this would leave us without any distinction between the two and consequently no real determinate understanding of subject or object. This was the problem with self-consciousness relating itself immediately to life. Self-consciousness found itself subject to life and driven by its natural impulses and therefore determined by its object rather than determining itself. As a consequence, self-consciousness was unable to understand itself as a distinct being within nature.¹¹

This provides the context in which we can see the struggle for recognition as specifically a life and death struggle. The turn to recognition is significant, at least in part, because it provides a separation between self-consciousness and life. Turning to the ideal of attaining the recognition of another self-conscious being allows for self-consciousness to prioritize something above its natural impulses and take something besides its natural existence to be essential to itself. This is why Hegel tells us that initially the participants in this struggle are “*self-sufficient*

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy or Mind: Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Wallace trans. Oxford University Press 1971, Sec. 418 Z. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Kojève (1969) puts great deal of emphasis on how self-consciousness engages in this development of raising itself above nature in the roles of master and slave.

shapes absorbed within the *being of life*” and that through this struggle each aims to achieve the “moment of absolute abstraction.”¹² And this moment is described more determinately as the display that one is not “shackled to life” and “fettered to no determinate existence.”¹³ It is certainly no accident, then, that we arrive at a life and death struggle. Putting one’s life on the line in this challenge places the desire for recognition above the most central and pervasive natural drive: self-preservation in the sense of one’s continued existence as a living thing. To achieve its own self-determination requires, at a minimum, that self-consciousness is able to exhibit itself as distinguishing itself from the natural world. It should be noted, however, that while the “moment of absolute abstraction” sought dictates that self-consciousness cannot be determined by, or reduced to, its natural existence, this does not entail that the distinction between life and self-consciousness is one of complete incompatibility. Recognition transforms the relation of self-consciousness to life, exhibiting self-consciousness as a unique form of existence that is still related in an important way to the natural world, a point that plays an important role in the resulting relation between master and servant.¹⁴

Taking the participants to be putting their lives at stake still leaves out why, exactly, they aim to “prove their worth,” not only to the other participant, but to themselves as well. To see this we first must recognize that self-consciousness is uniquely responsible for its separation from nature and its cognitive mode of existence. Hegel describes the “spiritual unity” of recognition as a unity in “its doubling,” or “infinity realizing itself in self-consciousness.”¹⁵ The

¹² Pinkard, pp. 110-111, par. 186.

¹³ Pinkard, p. 111, par. 187.

¹⁴ This transformed relation to life that emerges in recognition is a particularly robust and intuitive example of how the transformative reading presents us with a helpful way to see central aspects of Hegel's project. It provides a compelling instance of the dynamic of infinity as a transcendence and reintegration of limitations and at the same time this transformation tracks a central transition in the text.

¹⁵ Pinkard, p. 108, par. 178.

self-determining structure of infinity is exhibited in the organic unity of life gives rise to the very distinctions that it “sublates” in its life processes. What Hegel is signaling here is that with recognition we see self-consciousness exhibiting a form of self-determination that shares this same infinite structure with life in that it is a unity understood as inseparable from its distinctions. Such a unity is what we have also referred to in the last chapter as a “reflected unity.” The social unity of the struggle between the two is something that can only be understood in terms of opposing challenges toward a common end. Thus, it is a unity that must be understood via the distinction between the two participants. But also the social unity between individuals is self-determining in the sense that it is grounded on the activities and attitudes of the participants. There is only a struggle for recognition, a genuine challenge, if both endorse that challenge in accepting it and pursuing to meet that challenge.

A second important distinction is also necessary to understand the social relation at hand: a distinction between one’s *attempt* to gain recognition and one’s actually gaining the recognition sought. The challenge each poses to the other in this struggle for recognition is a challenge to each’s claim to be the one that will prevail in gaining the recognition of the other. Each participant desires the other’s recognition and in engaging in the struggle reveals a sense that he ought to have the authority sought. This gives rise to a primitive kind of distinction between what each takes to be true about oneself and what is actually true about oneself. The participants have a claim of their “worth” and it is through the struggle with one another that this claim is tested and verified. This distinction between what one thinks about oneself and what is true about oneself is necessary to understand the dynamic of this confrontation. Moreover, with this challenge this distinction has an appearance and a determinacy to it. Each is held to an implicit commitment to gain authority, making the claim of each manifest to the other and to

oneself. The social existence of participants exhibits self-awareness in the sense that there is an essential subjective dimension to how each views both the other and oneself. The dynamic of proving one's worth entails that one has a sense of one's worth to prove and that one equally has a sense that the other's worth must be proved as well.¹⁶

2. The Servant as Essence

Famously this life and death struggle results in the enslavement of one of the self-conscious beings and a “one-sided and unequal” form of recognition [*Anerkennung*]. Turning to this social relation I want to follow the development of the master-servant relation with respect to two main structures that are already present in ‘Self-Consciousness.’ First is that recognition admits of the self-relational structure Hegel sets out at the very beginning of this chapter: it is a relation to an “other” which is a relation to oneself. This self-relation--in this case the proving of one's worth to oneself--is the central aim of this shape of self-consciousness and the success and failure to attain this self-relation tracks the success and failure of the social roles of master and servant.¹⁷ Along these same lines, the second structure is that of a “topsy-turvy” inversion, revealing that what initially appears as the “inessential” component of this spiritual unity turns out to be that which is really essential, or the “truth” of this shape of consciousness. These two structures are

¹⁶ Brandom (2007) refers to the Samurai practice of “*seppuku*” as a case of ritual suicide that exemplifies putting one's honor above one's life. While I think this shares the sort of structure that Hegel is after in terms of a self-relation, I think it is important to note some differences between Brandom's example and Hegel's description of a life and death struggle. Putting aside the importance of the conflict between the two self-conscious beings, on the reading I advance here it is important that the protagonists do not have the kind of sophisticated self-conception that a Samurai would. The reason for this is that establishing practices and traditions plays an important role in the development of self-consciousness moving forward from the position of the servant. Along these same lines, the primitive nature of this struggle is also significant as it reveals how self-consciousness separates itself from a mere naturalistic existence, something that is not highlighted in the more refined practice of *seppuku*.

¹⁷ There are two aspects of this point that are characteristic of the transformative reading. First is that we continue to build on the insights of what has come before with respect to the character of the self-relation at issue. Second is that we are careful to see this self-relation as a self-imposed constraint. This allows us to gage more accurately how these social relations meet their own standards rather than those we apply to them.

intertwined in the development of the master-servant relation. The servant turns out to be, paradoxically, the essential role of the master-servant relation and to exemplify the self-relation that the master lacks.

This kind of inversion can be found at a number of places in the *Phenomenology*, but it parallels the role of life in the previous shape of consciousness fairly closely, as life turned out to “condition” self-consciousness and be the “essence of desire.” Anticipating that the servant will turn out to be the “essential” role of the master-servant relation and that the servant will exhibit a kind of self-awareness that the master will lack is helpful in approaching Hegel’s treatment of these roles. But there is a substantial characterization of the self-awareness the servant is able to achieve that I want to draw attention to: what the servant achieves that the master does not is the “intuition of self-sufficient being *as its own self*” in which the servant “comes to acquire through himself a *mind of his own*.”¹⁸ With the servant we see the achievement of a self-relation that is substantially different from the original aim of recognition, yet draws us close to the conceptual thinking of stoicism. In the next two sections I will consider the latter move in some detail, but first we must present the elements of the relation between master and servant with an eye towards the self-relation each achieves.

Engaging in the struggle for recognition, each participant has the ambition of assuming authority over the other and a willingness to put this ambition over any regard for its continued natural existence. Resulting from this encounter, Hegel turns to a situation in which one of the participants submits to the other, granting the other authority over himself. In doing so our participants take on certain social roles.

“One is self-sufficient; for it, its essence is being-for-itself. The other is non-self-sufficient; for it, life, that is, being for an other, is the essence. The former is the *master [Herr]*, the latter is the *servant [Knecht]*.” (Pinkard, pp. 112-113, par. 189)

¹⁸ Pinkard p. 115, par. 195 and p. 116, par. 196, respectively.

Backing down from the pursuit of recognition in order to save his own life, the servant is left to carry out the demands of the other. Thus, the servant's being is in being for another and the servant's role exemplifies "non-self-sufficiency." On the other hand, the master does not cling to life, proving that he is fully committed to his pursuit of recognition. He assumes the only authority to be had in this relation and is in the position of issuing demands without answering to them himself. The master's role is that of having "absolute power" in his relation to the servant. But while it may seem that the master is triumphant in assuming his position of authority, his self-sufficiency turns out to be only the mere appearance of self-sufficiency, whereas the "non-self-sufficiency" of the servant will prove itself to really be a form of self-sufficiency.

Proceeding by examining each role in turn, Hegel begins with the role of the master. There are two important aspects of the master's situation: a success and a failure. Where the master seems to succeed is in his relation to his natural impulses for consumption.

"Where desire had failed, the master now succeeds in being over and done with the thing, and he achieves satisfaction in his consumption of it. On account of the thing's self-sufficiency, desire did not achieve this much, but the master, who has interposed the servant between the thing and himself, as a result only links up with the non-self-sufficiency of the thing and simply consumes it." (Pinkard, p. 113, par. 190)

Having a servant in place to deal with the natural world--providing the master with food, shelter and the like--the master is freed from the burdensome task of appropriating these things for himself, leaving him to simply enjoy the satisfactions of consumption. The master is now able to maintain a status in which he is not "shackled to life," yet also able to meet his natural desires. The social roles assumed and the relation of authority in place allow for the master to have a relation to the natural world in which he "relates himself *to the thing mediately through the servant.*"¹⁹ But this is only part of the end our protagonists sought to achieve. It is not merely

¹⁹ Ibid.

that one must prove to be untethered to one's natural existence; what our protagonist is after is recognition. It is with respect to this end that the master fails. The significance of positing another self-consciousness was to achieve recognition in the eyes of an equal and, given the extreme disparity between the notions of master and servant (even under a variety of understandings), it should be clear that the established recognitive relation will be far from mutual. As a participant in the struggle for recognition, our protagonist specifically sought out another self-consciousness, but when the other submits entirely to his will, the master does not see the servant as an equal any longer. As Hegel puts it, "the object in which the master has achieved his mastery has become, in the master's own eyes, something entirely different from a self-sufficient consciousness," and, "as a result, a form of recognition has arisen that is one-sided and unequal."²⁰ The master, then, fails to attain the recognition that originally prompted the struggle.

The master lacks the self-satisfaction of gaining the recognition he sought out. It is not that the master does not assume a position of authority *in fact*, or is not recognized as authoritative by the servant. The issue is that, with the absence of any challenge, the master does not experience himself as wielding his authority and raising himself above the resistance of another. This is yet another instance of what we have labeled as an abstract unity. The master's role is paradigmatically or ideally the role of an authority with no limitations on it and is incompatible with any division or disagreement. Put differently, the master aims to rid himself of any alternative authority rather than integrate or reconcile himself with it. Following the submission of the other to the position of the servant, the master has an authority which is simply the absence of any challenge by another. We should then be able to anticipate that it encounters

²⁰ Pinkard p. 114, par. 192 and p. 114, par. 191, respectively.

the failure that it does. Turning to the experience of the servant and what we know about infinity, however, we can also anticipate that the role of the servant includes the limitations the master lacks, allowing for the possibility of the servant to transcend those limitations. Indeed, it would seem that the role of servant is defined almost entirely by its limitations and lack of freedom. Stoicism will appear as the form of a transcendence of these limitations and shortly we will consider the way in which the experience of the servant leads to such a transcendence. For now, we need an overview of the kind of restrictions on the role of the servant and how the servant experiences those restrictions.

Hegel tells us that the “*truth* of the self-sufficient consciousness is thus the *servile consciousness*” and that the experience of the servant consists in the “two moments of fear and service.”²¹ These moments can be seen to correspond to the two ways in which the servant is the essential aspect of the social relation between master and servant. That is, each provides an aspect to how the servant is the role that sustains and supports the social unity of this relation.

Beginning with the moment of service, we can see the essential role of the labor of the servant with respect to the master’s relation to nature. While the master does not need to deal with the natural world to satisfy his desires (specifically his natural urges), for the master to be “over and done with the thing” the servant must be there to procure and fashion items for the master’s consumption. Quite straightforwardly, the master is dependent upon the labor of the servant for his consumption and, thereby, for his continued existence. But there is a further and more pointed aspect to this dependency wherein we might say that the master is dependent upon the servant *in order to be and live as a master*. The servant is required for the master to continue in his role as master with respect to his relation to the natural world, but also with respect to his

²¹ Pinkard p. 114 par. 193, p. 116 par. 196, respectively.

social status. And, as we have established, the master does not confer onto the servant any recognition since the servant is not seen as an equal. Thus, the servant not only does all the work to sustain the master, but the servant is responsible for establishing the social status of the master too. The master's recognition "comes about through another consciousness" and this is in light of the servant positing itself "as inessential" and making the master's authority actual by way of "working on the thing" in the master's stead. The second point of sustaining and perpetuating the master's authority has to do with the fear the servant experiences. What Hegel refers to with the fear of the servant—a fear that is experienced in and after the life and death struggle—is a fear that has a certain pervasive characteristic. The servant "was not driven with anxiety about just this or that matter. . . rather it had anxiety about its entire essence."²² This fear, then, permeates the existence and activities of the servant, specifically its labor, giving the servant's work the character of actualizing the authority of the master.

While we can see that the burden and responsibility of the perpetuation of the master-servant relation falls to the servant and in this way the servant is the essential role, what Hegel sees in the experience of the servant is the emergence of a kind of self-determination and self-awareness. What we are really supposed to see in the moments of fear and labor is the servant coming to have a "mind of his own." Fleshing out what Hegel means by this and why it leads us to see the servant as turning to stoicism is the main task of this paper. This is the point at which the self-awareness of the developing consciousness begins to exhibit a more familiar shape of self-conscious rational thought and so it is important to see precisely why this specific kind of self-relation emerges out of the servant's role. There are a few points that we can highlight at the outset to outline the significant features Hegel sees in the servant's experience. First has to do

²² Pinkard, p. 115, par. 194.

with the labor of the servant exhibiting a sense of mastery over his own natural impulses. For the servant, his work demands that his desire is “held in check” [*gehemmt Begierde*] since his labor gathers and processes goods for the consumption of another, requiring that he not succumb to his own desires in his work. Hegel also sees the labor playing an important role in elevating the servant above the natural existence he originally seemed bound to: “in his service, he sublates all of the singular moments of his attachment to natural existence, and he works off his natural existence.”²³ “Fear of the lord” is certainly the main source of the servant’s labor and in this way we can see that, at a minimum, the servant experiences his social role as taking priority over his natural existence. And the ability of the servant to place the needs of the master over his own surely presents a form of self-determination that is more sophisticated than that of animals, but this does not yet bring us to the servant turning towards conceptual thinking.

It would seem that we could surely see the servant as exhibiting a kind of self-determination consistent with the above points that fell short of the “heights of conceptual thinking”—perhaps centered around sociality, skills, the use of tools and the like. Stoicism, however, is concerned with the “pure universality of thought” and a sense that the “the true and the good is supposed to consist in rationality.”²⁴ While I have given only a quite short description of some of the features of servitude that Hegel brings attention to, we should be able to see the main hurdle of a more thorough treatment of it. The task of understanding the plight of the servant is to see how it transcends the social relation of recognition in such a profound way. How does the failure of recognition—its actualization in the impoverished form of a merely “one-sided and unequal” recognition—propel us to think of knowing as a practice or way of life grounded on universal principles?

²³ Pinkard, p. 115, par. 194.

²⁴ Pinkard, p. 119, par. 200.

3. The Contingency Reading and Absolute Fear

One strategy in the literature is to see the servant turning to universal ideals in light of coming to recognize the master's authority as ultimately contingent on his social role. On this reading the servant comes to the realization that the master's demands are less than genuinely authoritative resulting in the servant turning to a way of life centered around a universal sense of true and good. This reading is advanced by both Fred Neuhouser and Terry Pinkard (although there are slight differences in how they advance their views on this issue) and it appears to capture a promising gloss on the servant coming to have a "mind of his own." The main issue with this strategy, I will argue, is that it runs directly counter to Hegel's characterizations of the master appearing to the servant as having "absolute power" and not merely contingent or arbitrary authority. As I will show, this difference is not merely nominal and is quite significant to understanding the experience of the servant. In light of this, I will also urge that there are other philosophical issues with this reading concerning the continuity of the transition to stoicism.

Both Neuhouser and Pinkard see the failure of the master-servant relation to consist in the servant's realization that the master's authority is not genuinely authoritative, resting on the contingency of his position. But these commentators differ on what specifically this authority is contingent upon. Considering Neuhouser's reading first, he focuses on the servant's obedience insofar as it exemplifies a kind of "self-mastery." In carrying out the master's demands and holding his own desires "in check" the servant exhibits a level of self-determination that "consists in subjecting one's will--subordinating one's particular, given desires--to the authority of a higher ideal that in some sense derives from oneself."²⁵ The sacrifice of one's immediate

²⁵ Neuhouser, F. 'Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord' in *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Westphal eds. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing (2009), p. 51.

desires reveals that one is obedient to some standard of correctness over and above what one simply wants. But while it is surely evident that the servant is beholden to the demands of another, one is likely to be suspicious of the notion that the master's demands constitute a genuinely "higher ideal." It would seem that this label overextends the authority of the master, especially in the context in which the master has gained authority through nothing more than a violent conflict with the servant. It is precisely this point that Neuhouser thinks the servant comes to realize in his experience of serving the master. "The higher ends he serves lack universality," according to Neuhouser and the servant realizes that "he labors to satisfy the merely particular and arbitrary ends of another individual, not for the sake of absolute, genuinely authoritative ends, those of freedom itself."²⁶ The contingency of the master's authority has to do with the fact that the master's demands are simply the demands of one individual and it is not clear why the master is genuinely entitled to issue such demands, save for his show of force. Thus, the "higher ideal" that the servant is obedient to proves to be less than genuinely authoritative.

Similarly to Neuhouser, Pinkard draws attention to the contingency of the master's authority, but he focuses on the servant's role in granting the master his authority, albeit under the threat of violence. This point was somewhat implicit in Neuhouser's interpretation, where it was emphasized that the servant exercised a degree of self-restraint in serving the "higher purpose" of the master's will. But Pinkard brings to the forefront the fact that one must endorse, or (more appropriately for the position of the servant) come to accept that higher purpose as authoritative.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pinkard is here drawing on one of the main features of Brandom's autonomy thesis discussed in chapter 3: "In this distinctive sense, rules get their normative force, come to govern our doings, only in virtue of our own attitudes. One

“The dominance of the master’s point of view is thus dependent on the slave’s *having come to accept it* as dominant--that is, the dominance of the master’s point of view is fully dependent on the slave’s *contingently* coming to accept it and on his *continuing* to accept it.”²⁸

One need not think of the servant as explicitly endorsing or declaring the master as authoritative. The way in which the servant comes to accept the master’s authority is through the practical means of taking up the position of being the servant. It is the continued and sustained labor of the servant that constitutes acceptance of the master’s authority. The role of servant consists in obedience to the master, which in turn presupposes some form of endorsement that grants an authoritative role. Were the servant not to accept the master as authoritative, we would not move past the stage of the fight to the death and into the domain of social relations. Put differently, there would be no servant or master if the participant defeated in the fight to the death continued to wholly reject the authority of the master.

Looking to the servant’s implicit endorsement of the master’s authority, we should recognize that this endorsement is dependent upon “*contingencies* in the past relationship between the two,” namely the life and death struggle that led to the submission of the servant. Through his labor, according to Pinkard, the servant comes to see that, not only is the master only authoritative because he bends to the master’s demands, but also that his acceptance of the master’s authority came about because of a particular event. The master’s authority, then, is contingent not because it consists in only the demands of a particular and arbitrary individual, but because it rests on a particular event and the continued endorsement of the results of that event. Coming to see this “will transform the slave’s own self-consciousness, since it shows him

is genuinely responsible only for that for which one *takes* responsibility; one is genuinely committed only to that to which one has committed oneself.” Brandom, R. *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, Harvard University Press (2002), p. 219.

²⁸ Pinkard, T. *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge University Press (1996), p. 60.

that what he takes as authoritative for himself is only contingently authoritative.”²⁹ The servant’s self-awareness—his coming to have a mind of his own—consists in him coming to see his role in granting the master his authoritative status as a result of the fight to the death and the coercive relation that followed.

There are two problems with the contingency reading, the first of which has to do with how Hegel describes the experience of the servant with respect to how he views the master. The contingency reading takes the servant to come to see the master as less than genuinely authoritative as a result of becoming aware that the master is only authoritative contingent on certain factors that appear arbitrary to the servant. In contrast, Hegel describes the master several times as “the absolute master” having “absolute power as such” [*absoluten Macht . . . überhaupt*], casting the master’s authority in a very different light than the contingency reading. But what is most significant about this is how it is connected to the fear of the servant and how this fear is an essential aspect to the servant coming to have a mind of his own. This indicates that Hegel’s description of the master’s “absolute” power is not a tangential characterization, but points to an indispensable feature of the servant’s experience and something necessary to understanding how the servant comes to have a mind of his own.

Essential to the servant’s experience are “the two moments of fear and service” which are “both necessary in a universal way.” As one of these moments, the fear of the “absolute” lord has important features Hegel focuses on that indicate the fear itself has certain characteristics of being absolute in a certain sense.

“This consciousness was not driven with anxiety about just this or that matter, nor did it have anxiety about just this or that moment; rather it had anxiety about its entire existence.” (Pinkard, p. 115, par. 194)

²⁹ Pinkard (1996), pp. 60-61.

Hegel is describing a kind of fear that is not directed at any particular event or concern. Instead, what he describes is a fear with the characteristic of being entirely pervasive. This corresponds to the impact of an absolute authority, an authority that is threatening in a way that is not restricted to only some aspects of one's conduct or constrained by a particular point of view. Hegel makes a point to emphasize just how pervasive this sense of fear is, noting that for the servant "all that was fixed within it [him] had been shaken loose."³⁰ There is a temptation here to think that Hegel is only describing the experience of the life and death struggle and the threat to one's entire natural existence. But Hegel goes on to affirm that this "absolute" fear is precisely what is necessary when he is describing the advance to stoicism.

"If he has not been tried and tested by absolute fear but only by a few anxieties, then the negative essence will have remained an externality to himself, and his substance will not have been infected all the way through by it." (Pinkard, p. 116, par. 198)

Were the servant to see the authority of the master as contingent on either his particular point of view or a specific past event, then such an authority would not evoke "absolute fear," but only specific anxieties associated with particular aspects of the servant's experience. In such a case, the authority of the master, the "negative essence" of their relation, would be external to the servant in the sense that he would not view it as genuinely binding.

While the life and death struggle may be viewed as a particular event that gives rise to the master's authority, the result is the establishment of an absolute dominance of one being over the other, a dominance that consists in social roles rather than more violence. This brings us to the second issue with the contingency reading: if the servant fails to recognize the master's authority, then why does the servant take an "inward turn" in adopting a stoic outlook? Pinkard himself takes note of the significance of the social roles of both master and servant. In endorsing

³⁰ Pinkard, p. 115, par. 194.

the master's authority and *continuing* to endorse it, the servant is providing a degree of stability to the situation that is required for there to be genuine social roles in place. That is, if the servant does not endorse the master's authority and submit to it, then he will not engage in labor practices and perpetuate his role as a servant. The idea of these social roles entails a degree of stability and signals a continued and sustained way of life. Given this feature of the master-servant relation, however, it would seem that the servant coming to see the master as not genuinely authoritative would lead to a breakdown in this way of life. In such a case the liberation of the servant would be material or external in the sense that it would involve the master losing his authority in demanding the labor of the servant. Of course, this begins to quickly part ways with the transition to stoicism in which the servant does not revolt against his social status, but instead takes the inward turn to find his genuine freedom in thought. Stoicism, it would seem, makes a great deal more sense if the master still holds sway, in some sense, over the servant's material existence, forcing him to turn away from that intolerable situation without doing so in a way that is physically or socially manifest.

4. Fear, Labor and Self-Consciousness

In the above I do not wish to dispute that from the position of stoicism the master lacks genuine authority, as what is authoritative for the stoic are universal ideals. What I want to draw from the previous discussion of the contingency reading is that finding the master to lack in authority does not seem to be the *cause* of the transition to stoicism. This is consistent with taking a rejection of the master's authority to *follow* from the adoption of the position of stoicism. In light of this our focus narrows with respect to how we understand the impetus for the servant to turn to stoicism. We seem unable to reconcile the text with the idea that the servant sees the master's authority as

arbitrary, as the contingency reading maintains. This requires us to see the servant as coming to have a mind of his own while still regarding the master as having absolute authority. In contrast to the contingency reading, I will advance a reading in which the absolute authority of the master plays an instrumental role in the servant coming to have a mind of his own. I argue that in his labor the servant internalizes the absolute sense of authority exhibited by the master and comes to see himself as engaging with the natural world in such a way that he answers to an absolute authority. The role of the servant demands an awareness of himself as beholden to a standard of what is “right” that he views as transcending individual interests. In this way the failure to attain mutual recognition and the resulting one-sided cognitive relation amounts to the emergence of a way of life centered around a universal sense of correctness. As with the other transitions we have considered in terms of a transformative development, the progression exhibits an instance of determinate negation in which the failure of the previous shape of consciousness emerges as our new shape of consciousness.

Before considering the servant’s experience in more detail we ought to parse out two aspects of the role of the master to avoid any confusion. On the one hand, there is surely something to the sentiment expressed by the contingency reading with respect to a general understanding of the role of the master. If we take the master to have the idealistic role of having no constraint on his demands, no challenge to his position, then the master exhibits a kind of authority that is absent any sense of accountability. This being the case, the master is only answerable to his own whims and desires and it would seem that the master must appear as issuing arbitrary demands, as there is no justification behind them. But this observation comes from an outsider’s perspective, as it were, not the perspective of someone who has “absolute

fear” of the master and is “driven with anxiety” about his “entire existence.”³¹ Not being in the position of the servant ourselves, we are likely quick to see the master as not responsible to any higher authority and, therefore, consider his demands arbitrary. On the other hand, if we are to grant that the master has *some* form of authority—even if we deem it to be less than adequate—then he must have authority over some other individual and to the extent he does, his lack of accountability evinces complete dominance over this other individual. The master does not answer to the servant at all and the servant in turn recognizes the master’s authority without attempting to question the master’s demands. From the servant’s viewpoint, the master is genuinely authoritative and, indeed, his authority is absolute. And we can see that the servant’s position as a participant in this one-sided form of recognition is consistent with the more general outlook that the master’s demands are arbitrary.

The experience of the servant has two interdependent aspects that reveal a transformation in his orientation toward the world. The first is that the fear of the master brings about a sense of an absolute value to his labor. Insofar as meeting the demands of the master is in service to an “absolute” authority, his labor is held to an absolute sense of correctness. Second, in taking up such a practice the servant must exhibit self-awareness of that absolute sense of correctness and hold himself to such a standard. Recognizing these points in turn will bring us to see how the servant not only comes to have a “mind of his own,” but also how his sense of self-determination is grounded upon universal or absolute principles.

Essential to the position of the servant is his fear of the master, a fear that Hegel remarks is the “beginning of wisdom.”³² And we have already outlined how the operative sense of fear

³¹ Again, with the transformative approach to these transitions, we are hesitant to evaluate the master's authority from an outsider's perspective—at least in a way that would explain the impetus of the transition. Thus we are less likely to see such a transition turn on an outsider's perspective in a way the contingency reading does.

³² Certainly a reference to Proverbs 9:10.

here is “absolute.” The servant fears the master in a way that it is pervasive for him, threatening his entire existence and not merely specific actions or pursuits. For the servant there is no hope that he can get away with particular actions that the master would disapprove of; instead the servant sees himself as entirely beholden to the authority of the master. But this only speaks to one element of the two moments of “fear and labor” that Hegel sees as essential to the servant.

“Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear is mired in formality and does not diffuse itself over the conscious actuality of existence.” (Pinkard p. 116, par. 198)

Along with fear of the master being pervasive, this fear is also more than a mere sentiment.

Hegel describes this fear as providing an orientation towards one’s practical engagement with the world. If the fear of the master and the corresponding sense of his authority is not to be “mired in formality,” then it must be made actual and brought about by service and obedience. As we have addressed this issue thus far, the “endorsement” of the master’s authority comes about through the labor of the servant—his actual carrying out of the master’s demands. Thus, the labor of the servant has the significance of realizing the master’s authority and therein realizing an “absolute” sense of authority.

Connecting fear and labor in the role of the servant—both being “necessary in a universal way”—and recognizing that the fear the servant experiences is of the absolute character we have outlined, the servant’s labor also takes on a certain character: he labors in service of an absolute authority. In a general sense we can understand this labor as the acquiring and fashioning of natural objects for consumption. The servant is tasked with dealing with the world so that the master can satisfy his desires. Certainly, this requires obtaining food and materials and processing them in various ways so that these items actually meet the desires of the master. One must find the right sort of items and fashion them in the right sort of ways so that they are suitable for consumption. This activity of labor, however, is not done in order to meet the needs

of the servant; instead this activity is performed in service of the master, someone who represents an authority that is absolute in the eyes of the servant. Obtaining the right items and fashioning them in the right way is then, for the servant, to meet an absolute standard of correctness. The master's demands are not merely the desires of another individual in this context. Insofar as the servant's labor satisfies the master's desires, the servant has done something "good" or "right" in a universal sense.

Hegel refers to the labor of the servant as "culturally formative activity" [*Bildung*] and speaks of the servant "forming the thing" in his labor. This formative activity surely refers to, in part, the way in which the servant's work involves fashioning objects and altering his environment to meet the desires of the master, but Hegel is careful to point out that there is the further significance of how this labor connects to the fear of the servant.

"However, what the formative activity means is not only that the serving consciousness as pure *being-for-itself* becomes, to itself, an *existing being* within that formative activity. It also has the negative meaning of the first moment, that of fear. For in forming the thing, his own negativity, of his being-for-itself, only as a result becomes an object to himself in that he sublates the opposed existing *form*." (Pinkard, pp. 115-6, par. 196)

Hegel goes on to refer to the relevant sense of "form" as "pure form" [*reine Form*] corresponding to "universal culturally formative activity." [*allgemeines Bilden*] In light of his fear, the natural world shifts from having the significance of merely natural objects categorized in terms of their roles in life processes to having the significance of being categorized and differentiated according to an absolute sense of "good."³³ The servant relates himself, then, to a world in which his activities conform to something on the order of universal principles of correctness.

³³ This is yet another example of how the insights of previous shapes of consciousness are retained, yet in a new, transformed way. The worldview of a life centered nature is retained, yet under the guise of a kind of universal sense of correctness.

Along with this, there is a shift in the servant's self-awareness, his "being-for-itself" that we have yet to develop. This is the second major shift in the orientation of the servant that I omitted up until this point. We have already mentioned how the servant exhibits a degree of self-determination in his role. His own desire is "held in check" in his labor, which is to say he is able to prioritize the master's desires over his own. We also saw that the role of the servant involves an implicit endorsement of the master's authority, which we now recognize as appearing to be absolute to the servant. If the servant is indeed laboring in service of an absolute authority—by his own lights—in such a way that he prioritizes this authority over his natural impulses, then the servant's role demands an implicit self-awareness of an absolute standard of correctness in his activity. The servant must hold himself to this standard and, as it corresponds to the pervasive fear he experiences, this self-awareness permeates his entire orientation to the world.

"However, the feeling of absolute power as such, and in the various particularities of service, is only dissolution [*Auflösung*] *in itself*, and, although fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom, in that fear consciousness is what it is that is *for itself*, but it is not *being-for-itself*. However, through work, this servile consciousness comes round to itself." (Pinkard p. 115, par. 195)

This is the context Hegel gives for his remark about the servant's desires being "held in check." The fear of the master is the fear of an absolute power that is ever present for the servant. This being the case, the servant's role demands a continual self-awareness that his activities are performed for the benefit of something other than himself, namely, the absolute authority he recognizes. In recognizing the master's authority the servant is also implicitly referring to his own role and giving his labor the significance of duty or obligation, however unrefined its form may be. Labor is an act of maintaining and perpetuating the authority of the master, but this is at the same time for the servant to maintain and develop his own sense of fulfilling his duties: to develop his own sense of correctness.

For the servant to maintain his position he must adopt and internalize the measure of approval exhibited by the master. The servant must be able to discern when he has performed his work adequately enough to satisfy the desires of the master. To this end, the labor of the servant involves holding himself to an implicit standard of correctness and the work he does exhibits his meeting that standard. The end product of his labor (for the servant) are goods fashioned and collected in the right sort of way and his environment crafted such that it is ordered correctly. In his labor the servant is meeting the standard of correctness he holds himself to.

“As a result, the form, by being *posited as external*, becomes to him not something other than himself, for his pure being-for-itself is that very form, which to him therein becomes the truth. Therefore, through this retrieval, he comes to acquire through himself a *mind of his own*, and he does this precisely in the work in which there had seemed to be only some *outsider’s mind*.” (Pinkard p. 116, par. 196)

Along with the all-encompassing fear of the master and the social roles that have been adopted, the sense in which the “form” is posited in objects and seen as the “truth” for the servant should not be regarded as an isolated event. The servant’s labor is a continual process of shaping his environment to meet the needs of the master, or, more accurate to the servant’s experience, to order the world in a way that is genuinely good or right. What initially seemed to be the master imposing his will upon the servant, turns out to be the servant establishing a self-conscious way of life in which he engages in the natural world in a way that is centered around an absolute authority and fulfilling duties in a way that are experienced as doing what is good in a universal sense. The servant’s role having the two moments of fear and service reveal a form of self-determination in which the servant not only has a mind of his own, but his self-awareness is exhibited in “universal culturally formative activity” that is a principled orientation toward the world.

5. Labor and Conceptual Thought

The shift in the servant's outlook, a shift that allows the servant to ultimately reject his social role and adopt stoicism, can be seen as a shift in how we understand the relevant notion of the subject-object distinction. In the turn to recognition we saw the activity of self-consciousness to give rise to a distinction between what one claims to be the case and what actually is the case. In the "trial by death" each participant has a claim to authority that would be either confirmed or denied through a life and death struggle. The challenge each self-conscious being presents to the other creates this distinction in calling into question what each "thinks" of himself and forcing the other to "prove his worth." With this relation, however, each participant's claim is a claim to have a kind of *social status* and making good on that claim is to prove one's worth by attaining that status in the eyes of another. Thus, the operative sense of what "is the case" here is a matter of social approval. In contrast, the servant arrives at a version of the distinction between what seems to be the case and what is the case that utilizes a much more familiar sense of the latter. For the servant the sense of correctness that shapes the ends of his labor is an absolute sense of what is right. The servant's claims about what the world is like are evaluated against a measure of what is "good and true" that does not consist in social approval. Although the measure of approval can be seen as the demands of the master--only another individual with a certain social authority--the master is not regarded as merely having one of many possible viewpoints by the servant. The master's approval takes on the meaning of an absolute measure of correctness for the servant and the resulting subject-object relation becomes one in which one's claims about oneself and world are claims about the way things are in themselves.

The resulting worldview that is concerned with a sense of "truth" and "good" that are universal in scope and not dependent on social approval or individual interest is one that is,

perhaps, more intuitive and brings us back to a more familiar epistemological standpoint in comparison to the previous shapes of consciousness. But while we seem to be more clearly headed towards the standpoint of absolute knowing, the previous progression leading up to this point informs the way Hegel casts our new shape of consciousness as conceptual thinking. This mode of relating oneself to the world through concepts is not a merely receptive and theoretical orientation that is abstracted from the world; instead, it is yet another, more refined, self-conscious way of life.³⁴

Hegel emphasizes that we are considering knowing as a subject-object unity with a certain character of being in the world, by contrasting conceptual thinking with representational thought.

“However, in that this content is at the same time a conceptually grasped [*begriffener*] content, consciousness remains *immediately* self-aware of its unity with this determinate and distinguished existent, not as it would be in the case of representation in which consciousness especially has to remind itself that this is *its* representation; rather, the concept is to me immediately *my* concept. Within thinking, I *am free* because I am not in an other, but rather I remain utterly at one with myself, and the object, which to me is the essence, is in undivided unity my being-for-myself; and my moving about in concepts is a movement within myself.” (Pinkard p. 117-8, par. 197)

The notion of representation that Hegel is referencing is that of a third element in the relation between subject and object, a marker of meaning or significance that must be attached to the object for which it signifies. Positing such an element in cognition would require applying it to its object and “reminding” oneself of its significance.³⁵ But for the form of relating oneself to the

³⁴ Here I am focusing on conceptual thought itself and not confining myself to stoicism. The latter surely sees thought in a way that is abstracted from the material world. However, I will show that this is a shortcoming of stoicism as a form of conceptual thought and that conceptual thought in general has an implicit claim to being actualized as a form of life.

³⁵ I take Hegel to be referring to a conception of representation that more closely resembles the kind of labels Wittgenstein refers to in the opening passages of his *Philosophical Investigations* than it does Kant’s conception of “*Vorstellung*.” For Kant, the “I think” must accompany all our representations, evincing that there is at least an implicit self-reference built into the very notion of representation he is working with. Whereas the situations Wittgenstein describes are those that see representation as a stilted and awkward third element in identifying an object as being of a certain type.

world that has emerged here, there is no such third element interposed between the subject and the world. The servant found himself forced to relate to the world as it is “in itself” in the sense that he had to categorize objects according to standards that transcended his own particular interests and conformed to a universal sense of right. Moreover, since dealing with natural objects in this way is essential to the role of the servant, such categories are completely immersed in the servant’s activities. Concepts provide a unity that exemplifies what we have identified as an organic unity that is interdependent with the distinctions among its manifestations. Drawing on this conception of a unity Hegel takes himself to have moved beyond a representational understanding of conceptual thought whereby concepts need to be “applied” to objects. This organic unity, then, is exhibited in the subject-object relation in which concepts are immanent in the servant’s relation to the world. This means that, in addition, the servant is self-aware in ordering the world according to his principled practical endeavors in that he both has internalized the absolute authority he sees in the master and must keep his own individual desires at bay. By holding himself to an absolute standard of correctness the servant has come to a place where he views himself as dealing with objects as they are in themselves.

With life, we will recall, we arrived at a conception of self-consciousness that was both immersed within nature and a form of self-reference through activity. In the turn to recognition these schematic features remained in the challenge between self-conscious beings and the resulting social roles, the servant, of course, being the role requiring the greater degree of self-awareness. Both exhibit a form of relating oneself to the world in a way that it is also a self-relation and a practical mode of being in the world. All of this informs the sense of “conceptual thought” that arises here, distinguishing it from the notion of a merely theoretical standpoint confined to purely mental or subjective activity, divorced from the world. Thus, when Hegel

describes this new shape of consciousness as “*thinking consciousness itself*,” in which “its object is the *immediate* unity of *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*” he is describing an understanding of knowing which consists in self-consciously relating oneself to the world as it actually is.³⁶ This purported sense of unity between subject and object, then, has the significance of “freedom” in which one “moves about in concepts” in such a way that conceptual thinking is the mode of actively perpetuating a unity of subject and object.

While this is surely a quite significant advance, it certainly falls short of absolute knowing. In line with a common theme of the *Phenomenology*, conceptual thinking emerges initially in its “immediate” form.³⁷ And as we will recall, Hegel’s notion of an immediate unity is that of an abstract or empty unity that cannot be thought to apply to a manifold of distinctions. This observation anticipates the failure of stoicism. Before addressing that issue directly, however, we ought to see how this shape of consciousness that we have identified as conceptual thinking emerges initially as stoicism.

As we might suspect, Hegel describes conceptual thinking as “infinite” and I have argued that the relevant notion of infinite that drives ‘Self-Consciousness’ is what I call infinite self-determination. This is achievement of a “return to self” by way of overcoming and preserving some limitation that is presented to self-consciousness. In the transition we are considering the salient sense of limitation ought to be clear: the servant is bound to his role by the master and is forced to labor for him. The principled existence the servant is forced to adopt in recognizing

³⁶ Pinkard p. 118, par. 197.

³⁷ While I cannot give a thorough account of the difference between conceptual thinking at this point in the *Phenomenology* and “the concept”—mentioned at the outset of ‘Self-Consciousness,’ but dealt with mainly in the *Science of Logic*--I do want to mark that there is a distinction. In fairly broad terms, the concept marks the speculative standpoint of conceptual thought, a refined form of conceptual thought. Here with the initial emergence of conceptual thinking, we have a quite rough version that needs to go through the conceptual development of the rest of the *Phenomenology* to reach this speculative standpoint.

what he sees as absolute authority in the master, however, consists in living in accordance with concepts of true and good that transcend the master's interests *as an individual*. It is the servant's recognition of a universal authority that grounds the order of both his dealings with the natural world and the social roles that are in place. This absolute sense of good and right, though, has been thoroughly internalized by the servant and the order of these distinctions is grounded on the "movement in concepts" exhibited in the self-determining activity of the servant.

"This consciousness is thereby negative with regard to the relationship of mastery and servitude. Its doing consists in neither being the master who has his truth in the servant nor in being the servant who has his truth in the will of the master and in serving him. Rather, it consists in being free within all the dependencies of his singular existence, whether on the throne or in fetters, and in maintaining the lifelessness which consistently *withdraws* from the movement of existence, *withdraws* from actual doing as well as from suffering, and *withdraws* into *the simple essentiality of thought*." (Pinkard p. 118, par. 199)

The servant's labor and his "coming round to himself" reveals that the roles of master and servant are dependent upon his own self-determination, rather than the other way around. Seeing these roles as inessential, then, leads to the transcendence of the bonds of servitude in a way that does not consist in a social upheaval. If the servant sees thought as what is essential to its own existence, then he will not seek a different social status for himself. The pursuit of an alteration in his social or material existence would be a pursuit of what the servant has come to find inessential to himself. Thus, the transcendence of his bondage consists in a "withdrawal" from the distinctions and activities that are viewed as inessential and a turn toward "the simple essentiality of thought."

Hegel describes stoicism as a shape of consciousness in which "something only has essentiality for consciousness, or is true and good for it, insofar as consciousness conducts itself therein as a thinking being," [*denkendes Wesen*]³⁸ and we arrive specifically at this position

³⁸ Pinkard, p. 118, par. 198.

because the servant has come to see thought as preceding its material and social conditions. This withdrawal into thought entails that the master's authority will be rejected insofar as the master represents a merely social status, but the rejection of the master's authority does not prompt the turn towards stoicism.

With the emergence of conceptual thought at this point in the *Phenomenology* it is important to negotiate between the insights and pitfalls of its initial form in stoicism. As we have mentioned, the notion of conceptual thought Hegel is working with ought to be understood as a way of life. The other forms of self-consciousness that follow are treated in the same way. The kind of skepticism Hegel considers is ancient skepticism and, accordingly, is treated not as a merely theoretical stance, but as a form of life consisting in a continual rejection of the universal ideals of the true and the good. The Unhappy Consciousness is also clearly a way of life that is religious in nature, consisting of various practices and the attempt to bring the "unchangeable" truth that exists beyond this world to bear upon one's material existence. So the advance is that of seeing conceptual thought as a practice or way of life, but this carries with it an implicit claim to actually apply to the various distinctions in the practical, natural and social world of self-consciousness. So the immediate withdrawal into thought exhibited by stoicism reveals quickly that it is conceptual thinking "only as the universal essence as such and not as this objective essence in the development and movement of its manifold being."³⁹ The transcendence of the master-servant relation and the turn towards the "higher ideals" of truth and good leads to a form of conceptual thought that lacks actuality.⁴⁰

"The freedom of self-consciousness is *indifferent* with respect to natural existence and for that reason has *likewise let go of natural existence, has let it be free-standing*, and the

³⁹ Pinkard p. 118, par. 197.

⁴⁰ Kojève (1969) has perhaps a slightly stronger take on this feature of the text, stating that "The Slave tries to persuade himself that he is *actually* free simply by *knowing* that he is free--that is, by having the abstract *idea* of Freedom." (p. 53)

reflection is a doubled reflection. Freedom in thought merely has pure thoughts as its truth, a truth without any fulfillment in life, and thus it is also not living freedom itself but only the concept of freedom, and, initially it is, to itself, only thinking itself with is its essence." (Pinkard, p. 119, par. 200)

The ensuing discussion of skepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness is concerned with how these universal ideals can have genuine "fulfillment in life" and constitute "living freedom itself." And while we do not get the full answer here, the path through the various stages of 'Self-Consciousness' have provided significant scaffolding for how we are to think of knowledge. We have arrived at a conception of knowledge which is a self-determining way of life, a practice, that has practical and social manifestations, yet is not grounded upon social approval or instrumental value. From the vantage point of the "Freedom of Self-Consciousness" we are able to see that Hegel has made significant strides in moving towards an innovative understanding of knowledge that we will soon come to see as Spirit.

Conclusion

The dissertation began by considering a central interpretive puzzle about ‘Self-Consciousness’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. While Hegel quite explicitly claims that the *Phenomenology* is a work of epistemology—“an *investigation and testing of the reality of cognition*,”—‘Self-Consciousness’ appears to, on the face of it, depart from this ambition. Following the first section ‘Consciousness’—concerned with quite straightforwardly epistemological positions like empiricism, perception and scientific realism—‘Self-Consciousness’ quickly departs from this familiar territory, claiming that self-consciousness is “desire *überhaupt*,” that its “object has become life,” only to be followed by a discussion of recognition exemplified in a relation between master and slave. So the puzzle is how we can reconcile these aspects of the text. On the one hand, understanding Hegel to be abandoning his self-proclaimed aim of investigating knowledge so early in the text is a quite uncharitable stance. On the other, to try and avoid taking these claims head-on or construe them as in some way metaphorical would be dismissive. The puzzle is all the more pressing when we note that in the secondary literature and in various traditions of philosophical thought, there are many that draw from these pages of the *Phenomenology*. Indeed, we have seen that a number of commentators recognize ‘Self-Consciousness’ as perhaps the most well-known and influential parts of Hegel’s corpus.

Taking this puzzle seriously, however, has a significant payoff. At the outset I presented three quite general desiderata of what a satisfactory reading of ‘Self-Consciousness’ ought to meet.

1. An adequate interpretation ought to provide an understanding of what Hegel means by an examination of knowledge (his phenomenological method).

2. It should reveal the main transitions from one shape of consciousness to the next as exemplifying this method, presenting the emergence of each topic as epistemologically motivated.
3. It should explain how ‘Self-Consciousness’ as a whole provides some *progress* towards absolute knowledge.

I take myself to have met each of these desiderata, but what should stand out at the end of our inquiry is how these desiderata are interlinked and how this has led to a fruitful interpretation of a difficult portion of an important text. In response to the first desideratum, I articulated an understanding of Hegel’s phenomenological method as what I call “transformative critique.” This understanding of how Hegel is investigating knowledge provided markers and insights on how to approach a stretch of text such as ‘Self-Consciousness.’ In the subsequent chapters of the dissertation this transformative reading was applied to the major transitions, meeting the second desideratum, and ultimately beginning us to a robust answer to the third. To see just how this was achieved it will be helpful to review the contents of each chapter with an eye toward these desiderata.

Chapter 1 focuses almost exclusively on the first desideratum: that of understanding exactly what Hegel means by an examination of knowledge. Very quickly we were able to see that Hegel takes this epistemological ambition quite seriously. In his introduction, Hegel considers a significant obstacle to being able to conduct such an investigation: an ancient skeptical problem known as the problem of the criterion. This problem is roughly that in order to conduct such an investigation it seems that Hegel must have a criterion by which to differentiate false conceptions of knowledge—mere appearances of knowledge—from the true, or genuine conceptions of knowledge—what he calls absolute knowing. Without such a criterion it would

seem that he could not so much as being his investigation. However, if Hegel does have this criterion at his disposal it would seem to render his so-called investigation superfluous, since he would already be able to identify absolute knowing. I argue that Hegel's phenomenological method is a response to this issue and offer an understanding of this methodology as what I call "transformative critique." On my transformative reading each stage of the phenomenology, i.e., each shape of consciousness, presents us with a step in a developmental process toward absolute knowing in which the conception of knowledge at issue transforms from one shape of consciousness to the next. On this reading, then, Hegel does not need to have a criterion for identifying absolute knowing at the outset, as genuine knowledge emerges as result of this transformative process.

To clarify my strategy and name some of the central principles of the transformative view, I juxtapose my view against an alternative strategy I call the absolute criterion view. The absolute criterion, which I see exemplified in the views of both Michael Forster and Kenneth Westphal, maintains that Hegel's phenomenological method provides us with a criterion for identifying absolute knowing that does not fall victim to the problem of the criterion. While Forster and Westphal have different accounts of exactly what this criterion is, I argue that both are unable to avoid the problem of the criterion. Moreover, they share the view that Hegel is proceeding by a unique kind of argument by elimination—considering various conceptions of knowledge and dismissing each until absolute knowing is revealed as meeting this criterion. This interpretive strategy takes on three commitments, all of which have counterpoints on the transformative view. First is the "static" commitment. For such an argument by elimination to take place a single overarching and uniform criterion must be in place so that there is a common measure by which mere appearances of knowledge can be eliminated and absolute knowing can

prevail. In contrast, on the transformative view, there is no such uniform criterion at work in the various shapes of consciousness; instead, each shape of consciousness is strictly evaluated according to its own measure. The view is called “transformative” because this measure is not static; rather, it shifts and transforms from one shape of consciousness to the next. Second is the “elimination” commitment, which is obviously tied to understanding Hegel to proceed by way of an argument by elimination. But this commitment speaks more to the character of the transitions from one shape of consciousness to the next. On the absolute criterion view, Hegel is simply eliminating one conception of knowledge after the next and it is the uniform criterion of evaluation that holds the entire progression together. With the transformative view, the failure to meet the self-evaluation constitutes what Hegel calls the “experience” of consciousness which gives rise to a “new object” of consciousness and the development towards the next shape of consciousness. Third is the “extrinsic” commitment, which marks how the criterion that is supposed to identify absolute knowing on the absolute criterion view is specified in advance of the evaluation of each shape of consciousness within the *Phenomenology*. This commitment misses a significant aspect of Hegel’s project, of which he makes note of in several places: that the development towards absolute knowledge is essentially a matter of self-development progressing towards the full self-realization of knowing. The transformative view focuses on this developmental aspect of Hegel’s project and sees absolute knowing not as something to be *identified*, but something to be *achieved*.

Chapter 1 gives a substantial answer to what Hegel means by an examination of knowledge and a determinate sense of the critical project he envisions. Moreover, the contrasting three marks of the transformative view provide important insights with evaluating the text and are applied in considering the major transitions of ‘Self-Consciousness.’ We first know that we

can expect rather sharp alterations shifts in the conception of knowledge we are considering and that these may involve substantial differences in what we take to count as knowledge in general. With a sensitivity to the “experience” of consciousness, we also know that we must pay special attention to the failure of the previous shape of consciousness to fully grasp the content and significance of the subsequent one. This strategy, then, tells us that we need to understand the shape of consciousness we encounter—especially the seemingly unorthodox ones—in a highly contextualized way. Lastly, we have on hand a way to see these various shifts in our conception of knowledge as relevant to a larger task: the development towards absolute knowing. Rather than understanding each shape of consciousness as being discarded for another conception of knowledge, we understand the transitions to constitute a *refinement* of our conception of knowledge and a progression toward a more *complete* understanding of knowledge. This allows us to see each new shape of consciousness as building upon the last, indicating that ‘Self-Consciousness’ as a whole should reveal a developmental advance towards what Hegel sees as a more promising conception of knowledge.

Chapter 2 is the first application of the transformative reading, focusing on the initial transition to ‘Self-Consciousness.’ The transition is sometimes referred to as the “practical turn” of the *Phenomenology*. In it there is a substantial shift in focus from what are traditionally viewed as theoretical concerns to practical concerns, i.e., thinking of self-consciousness as desire and taking its object to be life. While the transformative view certainly prepares us for the possibility of such a dramatic shift, we can also anticipate that the shift must mark some development towards absolute knowing. In contrast to interpretations that take Hegel to be changing topics at this juncture and perhaps presupposing some significant claim about the primacy of practical knowledge, I maintain that Hegel’s concerns with these practical topics and

their applicability to our conception of knowledge follows from the larger and more central aim of grasping genuine knowledge. To fill out this claim, following the insights of the transformative view, I focus on the failure of the Understanding that leads to ‘Self-Consciousness,’ namely the problem of the inverted world. There I identify a problem with understanding natural laws as attempting to provide order to natural phenomena. Hegel thinks we are unable to connect these abstract laws with the phenomena they are supposed to explain. But in this problematic Hegel sees a solution. In the activity of explanation consciousness is distinguishing between subjective and objective elements in cognition, i.e., the way things appear to us from the way things are in themselves. Yet, an explanation is a unified phenomenon in which this division is constitutive of this unity: an explanation is only as such if there is a genuine difference and relation between the explanandum and the explanans. This structure allows for a unity to be intertwined with differences and not inherently divorced from the various phenomena it is supposed to bring order to. Hegel refers to this structure as “infinity,” a self-determining activity of establishing and overcoming limitations exhibited in certain objects, but perhaps most intuitively in life. Such a structure, however, is not merely exhibited in the world of experience, it is exhibited in the subject and the relation between subject and object. Thus, by paying careful attention to the “experience” of consciousness at this important juncture we are able to see a shift in understanding knowing in terms of the subject-object relation as a whole and, moreover, as an activity. This activity is inherently self-referring as consciousness must understand knowing as an activity of relating itself to its object. These insights bring into focus Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness is desire, as desire exemplifies a self-referring relation to an object that is both the grounds for a division between the subject and its object and an implicit unity in the drive for satisfaction. Again, paying careful attention to the context in which this

claim arises, I argue that Hegel has in mind a certain kind of aim, what Sebastian Rödl calls infinite ends. Examples of infinite ends are things like health and they are unique in that the desire for them does not terminate in the satisfaction gained by achieving them. What is significant about such desires is they factor into a unifying activity of maintenance and perpetuation. All of this brings into focus, by the end of the second Chapter, that Hegel is moving towards thinking of knowing as a kind of practice and a practice that is a self-aware mode of being in the world.

The application of the transformative reading brings into view how the practical turn of ‘Self-Consciousness’ is sufficiently epistemologically motivated, but it also provides an avenue to see the development of the idea that knowing is a self-aware and active way of relating to the world, a notion that is advanced in the subsequent transition to recognition. This rather well-known transition is covered in Chapter 3, where we continue to tackle the second desideratum and apply the central features of the transformative reading. In this transition self-consciousness initially takes life to be its “immediate object” and this leads to a certain failure prompting the positing of another self-consciousness. With the application of the transformative view in Chapter 2, we have a sense of what it means for life to be the object of self-consciousness. Since life exhibits the self-determining structure of infinity there is a shared unifying and self-referring structure for both knowing and living things in general. This thought I develop, noting some important passages that show Hegel thinks living things exemplify a certain degree of subjectivity and that there is a primitive kind of identity between the epistemic subject and living things. Recognition of this runs counter to some interpretations that see Hegel as presenting a hard and fast distinction between self-conscious beings and mere living beings we commonly do not regard as self-conscious, such as other animals. On such a reading it is the move to the social

relation of recognition that is supposed to help mark the distinction between self-conscious beings and other living things. However, taking Hegel's comments seriously I argue that self-consciousness has a conflicted relation to life. On the one hand, self-consciousness identifies as a living being and shares with life the infinite self-determination we have noted. On the other hand, life represents a kind of finitude and limitation for self-consciousness in the form of the instinctual drives a living being is constrained by. Recognizing this conflict is fundamental to grasping this transition, I argue, and I motivate this by considering an alternative reading that fails to take notice of this. Fred Neuhouser understands life to only represent the finite to self-consciousness and as a result the motivation to posit another self-conscious being in order to achieve a transcendence of this finitude is lacking. Specifically, given our careful attention to the previous failure of the Understanding, we are well aware that Hegel sees life as exhibiting infinite self-determination, revealing that we need a more nuanced understanding of why another self-conscious being *must* be posited.

In contrast to Neuhouser's view and in line with my transformative reading, I take the transition to recognition to build upon the idea that consciousness must be, in some way, living. In my view recognition allows consciousness to see itself as a living thing that transforms its orientation toward its natural impulses and articulates itself as a distinct form of life. The experience of consciousness reveals that consciousness is not self-determining as a merely living thing, despite life itself exhibiting infinite self-determination. Instead, consciousness sees itself as determined by its object, life. It experiences its natural impulses as driving it and, thus, this failure gives rise to the idea that consciousness must be its own object. The positing of another self-conscious being makes self-consciousness the object in two ways. First, taking another self-

conscious being as its object, self-consciousness is the object in the sense that the object is the same in kind. Second, this allows each self-conscious being to be the object for the other.

With this move I identify some significant epistemological advances. The recognitive relation that emerges gives rise to a robust sense of subjectivity, much more pronounced than the self-reference of living things. Each participant in this relation is held accountable to the other, opening up a distinction between what each *takes to be the case* (at this point with respect to themselves) and what each *really is* in the eyes of the opposing being. The beings present a challenge to each other and the conflict involves overcoming the aforementioned distinction. This means that, first, the mutual acceptance of such a challenge is self-grounding, as the challenge each experience is dependent upon the endorsement of this challenge by each. This provides a way in which this social relation is itself a new form of infinite self-determination. Second, this relation gives a determinate appearance of this subjective dimension, i.e., the challenge allows what someone thinks of oneself to be experienced by both the other participant and by oneself. Sociality gives a manifestation to subjectivity.

Chapter 4 gives a reading of yet another major transition in ‘Self-Consciousness,’ but one that helps us see how the development we have been tracking--from infinity to life to recognition--contributes significantly to the advance towards absolute knowing and meeting the third desideratum. The final transition I consider is from servitude to stoicism. The recognitive relation that emerges is an adversarial one, prompting a life and death struggle resulting in the enslavement of one self-conscious being by the other. The unfolding of this relation is well known as the “Master-Slave Dialectic.” Still focused on self-determination, Hegel famously sees the servant as exhibiting a level of self-determination the master does not and the transition to stoicism follows the development of the servant. There is an intuitive narrative to this transition

in which the servant, unable to experience freedom in the material and social world, turns inward to experience freedom in thought. But what this narrative does not explain, I argue, is that the emergence of stoicism is the emergence of conceptual thought, a transformation into a way of relating to the world via concepts and a universal sense of truth and right. What is needed is more than an account of how there is a turn *away* from the role of servitude; what is needed is an account of why servitude results in a transformation *toward* conceptual thought.

Our developmental approach first provides much needed context for the initial struggle of life and death. First the risking of one's life in this struggle represents precisely the mediated relation to life discussed in the last chapter. The social relation allows one to have attitudes towards one's own life and demonstrate that one is not entirely beholden to one's natural drives. Second, this struggle represents the initial challenge in which one "proves one's worth" to the other and oneself, developing the earlier observation that this social relation gives manifestation to subjectivity in the sense that what one thinks of oneself, or one's sense of one's "worth" has a determinate appearance in this struggle. After outlining how the servant comes to be the focus for the transition to the next shape of consciousness, I consider the issue of the experience of the servant and how this is supposed to give rise to stoicism exactly. One plausible strategy is what I call the "contingency reading" advanced by Fred Neuhouser and Terry Pinkard. Each has a slightly different version of this strategy, but the overarching view is that the servant comes to see the master's authority as contingent—either the point of view of one individual or dependent upon other contingencies in how the master came to assume his position. The main issue with this reading is that Hegel's description of the servant's experience is very different. According to Hegel the servant's position is marked by the moments of "fear and labor," and what he describes is the servant having "absolute fear" of the master, regarded as having "absolute power

as such.” And this fear—viewing the master as having absolute authority—is what drives the labor of the servant to continually meet the needs of the master and perpetuate his social status.

Again, as the transformative view indicates, paying close attention to this experience of the servant will allow us to properly understand the emergence of the new object of consciousness. And in this case the “static” commitment is at issue. Surely from an outsider’s perspective the master’s absolute authority is regarded as contingent, but viewing the master from the servant’s perspective the master is not viewed as having merely another perspective; the master is viewed as having the ultimate authority that is absolute and beyond reproach. This is the internal perspective that needs to be tracked in order to see how we turn to conceptual thought. With this in mind, I argue that the labor of the servant—his procuring and fashioning goods in service of the master—takes on the significance of meeting an absolute standard of correctness. For the servant, meeting the master’s needs is to do something “good” or “right” in a sense that the servant regards as universal in scope. Moreover, the labor of the servant is a continual practice in which he must employ this internalized sense of correctness on his own. This being the case, the result is that the failed attempt at mutual recognition gives rise to the servant relating to the world via universal principles.

With this turn to conceptual thinking we arrive at a unique, yet more familiar picture of knowing that what has preceded. But what allows us to see just how innovative this idea of conceptual thinking is is the way in which this shape of consciousness is informed by the development leading up to it. In the initial turn to ‘Self-Consciousness’ we saw the shift to regarding knowing as an activity and a subject-object relation. The structure of infinity allowed us to see how we could understand the subject-object relation as a whole, while maintaining that they are distinct from one another. Life provides us with the immediate form of such a relation

where the same principle both unifies and separates a thing from its environment. Also, at this juncture we witness a radical shift in how we understand the order of the natural world. Instead of seeing this order as constituted by natural laws, we adopt a life-centered view of the world and understand nature ordered according to the activities of living beings. But this new shape of consciousness is labeled “self-consciousness” because this active mode of relating to the world is self-referring. Consciousness is related to the world in a way that is constitutively self-aware. This self-awareness is then transformed and developed in the turn to recognition wherein consciousness begins to separate itself from being a merely living being and assume a mode of being where it is responsible for its own distinctive way of relating to the world. All of this brings us to a point that, when we arrive at the emergence of conceptual thought, we are far from the notion of a Cartesian subject, or the idea of mental states that occur in isolation from the world to which these thoughts apply. What we have instead is a way of relating *to* the world and *in* the world via concepts, a conceptual life-form that is practical and socially embedded. The original shift to understanding nature in terms of the activities of living beings is built upon in a number of ways leading up to this point. At first, the determinacy of objects has a practical significance, i.e., the world is “broken up” into classifications of objects as they relate to life processes: food, water, shelter, etc. With recognition these classifications then fit into a social dynamic and mode of production in the labor of the servant. And in the turn to conceptual thought these classifications then come to have a further significance: they become something on the order of universal categories of items in the world.

Applying the transformative view, then, we are able to identify a trajectory that is quite substantial in advancing us towards absolute knowing. The transformative reading allows us to not only navigate the difficult transitions in ‘Self-Consciousness’ but also see a robust

epistemological development in these pages that, although not yet bringing us to absolute knowing, presents us with a number of substantial points about how we ought to understand knowing.

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