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Scott Jonathan Cowan  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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HEGEL BETWEEN CRITICISM AND ROMANTICISM:  
LOVE & SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE *PHENOMENOLOGY*

by

Scott Jonathan Cowan

A Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
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at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2017

## ABSTRACT

### HEGEL BETWEEN CRITICISM AND ROMANTICISM: LOVE & SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE *PHENOMENOLOGY*

by

Scott Jonathan Cowan

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Dr. William F. Bristow

Hegel's formulation of self-consciousness has decisively influenced modern philosophy's notion of selfhood. His famous discussion of it appears in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and emphasizes that self-consciousness is a dynamic process involving social activity. However, philosophers have struggled to understand some of the central claims Hegel makes: that self-consciousness is (a) "desire itself" which (b) is "only satisfied in another self-consciousness"; and that (c) self-consciousness is "the concept of Spirit." In this paper, I argue that Hegel's early writings on love help make sense of the motivation behind these claims, and thereby aids in understanding their meaning. Hegel's writing on love is usually treated as if it were either a failed precursor to his philosophy of Spirit, or that he eventually demoted love to the ethics of the familial sphere. In my view, both approaches offer valuable insights, but fall short: they inadequately account for the philosophical continuity between his early and later work. In contrast, I claim that the philosophical issues Hegel began investigating via love—i.e., modern individuality, the unity of subject and object, and the nature of life—remained among his central concerns in the *Phenomenology*. I argue that understanding Hegel's view of love requires focusing on how the idea rests upon a tension between post-Kantian critical philosophy and Romanticism. By framing his writing on love as philosophical in its own right (rather than merely religious), it becomes clear that Hegel's early writings are

continuous with his mature work; and that his work on love reveals the philosophical motivation underlying the claims about desire, satisfaction, and the concept of Spirit in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*.

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To,  
Katy and Lou

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## 1. Introduction

Hegel's formulation of self-consciousness has decisively influenced modern philosophy's notion of selfhood. Among the most important features of his account is the idea that self-consciousness is necessarily a dynamic process involving social activity. His famous discussion of self-consciousness—Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*<sup>1</sup>—cuts hard against Cartesian ideas: that the self is inner, private, or substantial. And while the *Phenomenology* has been called “one of the strangest books ever written,” its central concerns are far from unfamiliar today (Kroner, 1971: 43). Hegel seeks to understand not only the capacities involved in perception, knowledge, agency, and normativity; but also the ways these capacities relate to one another.

The *Phenomenology* presents a succession of stages that detail the structure of human experience. Beginning from the standpoint of ordinary consciousness, Hegel aims for the philosophical discovery of absolute knowledge. However, his “phenomenological” method focuses less on a subject's experience as such, and more on the transformation of a subject's concepts, which give shape to the subject's experience. For instance, in concluding the book's first section Hegel states that in examining consciousness, a “necessary advance” can be observed, wherein consciousness becomes *self*-consciousness (*PS*: §164). That is, he demonstrates the way consciousness necessarily comes to consider itself as essential in relation to the objects of conscious activity.

While the book's opening chapters are by no means simple, unavoidable difficulties arise in Chapter IV. There, Hegel makes some of the most obscure claims of the entire book, stating: that self-consciousness is (a) “desire itself” which (b) is “only satisfied in another self-consciousness”; and that (c) self-consciousness is “the concept of Spirit.” Interpretations (even conflicting) abound. The difficulty is that Hegel makes these claims so suddenly, as if out of nowhere. The aim of this

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<sup>1</sup> I use Terry Pinkard's 2010 translation.



paper is to clarify the motivation behind these claims, and thereby to aid in understanding their meaning. To achieve this task I turn to Hegel's early writing on love. In these early texts Hegel struggles with the themes of self-consciousness, freedom, and life—ideas also central to Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*. Moreover, Frederick Beiser (among others<sup>2</sup>) notes that the “early reflections [on love] are really the key to unlock the mystery of Hegel's concept of Spirit” (2006: 113). If this is the case—and self-consciousness is “the concept of Spirit”—it follows that love pertains to self-consciousness. There is a growing body of literature on Hegel's view of love, yet nothing has been said about how love clarifies self-consciousness.

My philosophical approach is archeological in nature: involving an historical investigation of a site (i.e., love) covered over during the construction of Hegel's theory of self-consciousness. My argument operates at three major levels. (i) In Section 2, by examining from figures who influenced Hegel, I locate three distinct coordinates of thought—modern individuality, ethics, and the principle of philosophy—that mark the domain of the problematic of his theory of love. (ii) In Section 3, I survey the territory Hegel granted to love, providing an interpretation that illustrates the ways Hegel used love to connect these distinct coordinates; and revealing three themes of love that support his account of self-consciousness. (iii) Next, in Section 4, I argue for reasons why he quit the project of love, bringing readers, in Section 5, to a fuller understanding of how self-consciousness replaced love. Yet, since the connection between Hegel's thoughts on love and self-consciousness has, until now, not been made explicit I must first justify my search for Hegel's theory of love beneath his account of self-consciousness.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Dieter Henrich claimed that, “once Hegel adopted the concept of love as the basic principle for his thinking, the system came forth without interruption” (as quoted in Williams, 1992: 77); or, as Robert Solomon stated, once “love drop[ped] out, the word ‘spirit’ [was] ready to take its place” (1983, 146). Judith Butler also sees continuity between the two concepts: love “is the name for what animates and what deadens...and becomes silently absorbed into his writings on spirit” (2015, 91).

## 2. Why Love?

On the face of it, love may seem like an odd concept to connect with Hegel's theory of self-consciousness. Love, for example, was for Hegel a mere feeling—and he is known for prizing rationality. Nevertheless, there are at least three reasons why it should not come as a surprise that excavating his theory of love helps make sense of his theory of self-consciousness.

1. Prior to writing the *Phenomenology* Hegel wrote somewhat frequently on love. He believed love was the pinnacle experience, expressing absolute life in nature: producing unity in difference and allowing for distinction within a unity. Thus, given Hegel's later focus on articulating the dynamic identity of unity and dis-unity—not to mention his assertion that subject and object, self and other, come together in the activity of self-consciousness—there are grounds for turning to love.
2. Placing love at the center of one's understanding of any of Hegel's doctrines goes against standard approaches to the topic. There are two general tacks in the literature. First, interpreters tend to trace continuity between love in Hegel's early writings and the role love plays in his politics and ethics.<sup>3</sup> On this approach, scholars suggest that Hegel eventually relegated love to the familial sphere. While still significant within the bond of marriage, love fails to unite society as a whole since it was rooted in feeling and unthinking passion. Second, other interpreters suggest (if only implicitly) a definite distinction between Hegel's early theological phase and his philosophical thought.<sup>4</sup> Hegel's writing on love is, indeed, closely connected to his interest in Christianity: as his interests shifted, he eventually abandoned love. The real significance of love, it is posited, is that it provides insight into Hegel's development before he conceived of Spirit. Both approaches share a common fault: neither treats Hegel's work on love as philosophical in

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<sup>3</sup> E.g.: Wood (1990), Stern (2012), Ormiston (2004), and Nicolacopoulos (1999).

<sup>4</sup> E.g.: Kojève (1980), Solomon (1983), Pippin (1989), Williams (1992), and Henrich (2003).

its own right, giving attention to love only because of its place in the development of his thought.<sup>5</sup> Both remain incomplete since neither captures Hegel's immediate philosophical concern with love.

In contrast, I argue that the philosophical issues Hegel began investigating via love remained among his central concerns in the *Phenomenology*. Specifically, I trace Hegel's struggle with the nature of modern individuality back to his writing on love; also his attempt at integrating feeling and reason, and his effort to articulate the unity of the subject and the object. Hegel saw love as a bond that united individuals, and could thus serve as the basis for community. However, he came to realize that love's unifying power could not be sustained in a modern society. As he saw it, modern individuality is rooted in reflective forms of rationality, which distinguishes sharply between thought and being, and self and other. Moreover, he saw modern individuality as inextricably linked to concepts such as atomism, private property, and rights-based society. In contrast, Hegel saw ancient Greek thought as pre-reflective, and the society characterized by immediate forms of knowing and being. Thus, in his early writing on love, Hegel was attempting to understand the nature of the modern subject and was exploring the philosophical details of the modern individual's loss of immediacy. Like Rousseau in *The Second Discourse*, Hegel was coming to terms with the alienating effects of forms of reflective rationality and individuality prized by the Enlightenment. It was not until the *Phenomenology* that Hegel articulated a satisfactory solution to this modern problematic. So, unlike the two approaches mentioned above, I demonstrate that Hegel's writing on love is straightforwardly continuous with his later philosophical work.

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<sup>5</sup> By "philosophical in its own right" I mean that Hegel's writing on love does not contain, among other things, insight into philosophical issues. Instead, in my reading, the problems Hegel was attempting to solve with love were, first and foremost, philosophical problems.

3. There is also a third, historical reason for turning to love. Leading up to his own writing on love, there had been a confluence of interest in both love and selfhood by thinkers influential to Hegel. In the discussion below, I consider the lineage of these themes through the work of the proto-Romantic thinkers Herder (his objection to Hemsterhuis) and Schiller, as well as through the post-Kantian critical philosopher, Fichte, and Hölderlin, his younger Romantic contemporary. Interestingly, in the work being produced by these thinkers the two themes are often discussed in relation to one another. So, while the transition from love to self-consciousness may seem like a leap today, for Hegel the themes were not nearly as dissociated. The conversation surrounding the topics was, however, multifaceted—without a single underlying theme guiding the discussion. Nevertheless, considering the broad contours of the conversations is important for my argument. Such consideration provides an understanding of, (a) why Hegel may have found love to be such a rich concept, (b), why his early writing ought to be viewed as philosophically significant, and (c), why the problems he sought to solve via love underlie his work on self-consciousness. Before detailing Hegel’s theory of love, therefore, the next section is dedicated to providing the coordinates of the problematic composing the site of his theory of love.

### **3. The Coordinates of Love’s Problematic**

As I mentioned above, the standard approaches to Hegel’s writing on love often begin by reflecting on religion or morality. Such a focus is important, but incomplete. A fuller understanding of Hegel’s theory requires taking into account the coordinates—i.e., the conversations surrounding love, and the problems it was used to address—through which he thought on love. I have located three revealing coordinates: (i) the debate the between Herder and Hemsterhuis concerning the

relation between love, individuality, and desire; (ii) Schiller's idea that love involves acting in harmony with nature, unifying inclination and duty in ethics; and (iii) Fichte's assertion, on the one hand, that self-consciousness can serve as the principle of a post-Kantian scientific philosophy, and on the other hand Hölderlin's use of love to refute the possibility of Fichte's project. Worth noting is that each of these coordinates deals with a different facet of modern thought. The first pertains to modern individualism, the second to ethics, and the third to theorizing about the principle of philosophy. Because of the diverse range of topics being addressed, the following section may initially appear fragmented. However, the significance of this disparity will become clearer by Section 3.<sup>6</sup> By attending to these distinct conversations, the problems Hegel believed love could solve (and therefore, the theory itself) will be clarified.

### 3.1 The Herder/Hemsterhuis Debate

In 1785, Herder published an influential essay, *Love and Selfhood*, which was a sharply critical response to Franz Hemsterhuis' 1770 *Lettre sur les Désirs*. Both essays are about love, specifically love's relation to desire and individuality. Hemsterhuis' essay contained a Neoplatonic theory of humanity's highest desire, or the impetus of love: pure unification with God or nature. For Hemsterhuis, "the absolute goal of the soul, when it desires, is the most intimate and most perfect union of its own essence with that of the desired object" (1770: 54). Echoing Plotinus, Hemsterhuis' understanding is that desiring means the desire to become one with the object of desire; and that such unification is made possible through love.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Hemsterhuis argues that all of nature is animated by the spiritual drive towards total unification. That is, nature itself is a process of striving

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<sup>6</sup> I do not mean to suggest that these three lines of thought are exclusive, or completely unrelated to one another. In fact, I think there is some obvious overlap between the thoughts. Schiller's thoughts on love and individuality, for instance, begin to reconcile the opposing positions in the debate between Herder and Hemsterhuis. There is also room for connection between Hölderlin's aesthetic account of pure being and Schiller's notion of being in harmony with nature; and between Fichte's and Schiller's attempt to synthesize Kant's dualisms. There are, no doubt, other significant connections that could be made.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, for example: "Every soul is an Aphrodite...as long as the soul stays true to itself, it loves the divinity and desires to be at one with it, as a daughter loves with a noble love a noble father...Only in the world beyond does the real object of our love exist, the only one with which we can unite ourselves fully" (1964: VI.9.9).

to satisfy a desire wherein “substances become united to such an extent that any notions of duality are destroyed,” leaving only the One (1770: 53). Hemsterhuis ranks love as the highest union possible for humanity. Because, in love, desire is only satisfied in the complete dissolution of individuality: it is realized when all that separates the lover from the beloved is stripped away. A loving union with God is therefore the most complete form of love—in religion, he says, “homogeneity, union, appears perfect” (1770: 55). And friendship between persons is merely an imperfect form of love. This is because friendship always depends on individuality and so is a less intense, less spiritual, desire for unity.

Herder found Hemsterhuis’ Neoplatonic model deeply problematic—especially as it concerned the vision of the modern, inalienable right of free individuality. In Hemsterhuis’ account individual existence was always passive, subordinate to the One. “It sounds beautiful to embrace the whole of creation with love,” Herder retorts, “but love begins with the individual” (1993: 119).<sup>8</sup> Thus, on Herder’s view, Hemsterhuis’ image failed to account for both the way an individual—*qua* individual—experiences love, and also for the fundamental significance of individuality whatsoever. The notion of a passive dissolution of individuality in love meant, for Herder, self-destruction. Moreover, Herder thought false Hemsterhuis’ assertion that the desire for union increased as one’s love became more spiritual. In Herder’s view, the pure spiritual union that Hemsterhuis idealized would “destroy the object of desire,” and as such is a “crude and transitory” model of love. The more true the love, Herder asserted, the more its object would be permitted to persist. “The more [love] endures, the more its object also endures” (1993: 113).

Herder posited that the experience of love was an activity that individuals engaged in. And because individuals performed that activity of love, individuals necessarily exist prior to love. As

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<sup>8</sup> C.f.: “It is impossible for one to flow together with *everything* like mud” and to also still remain as oneself.” Or, more biting: “those who think they embrace the whole universe with love usually love nothing but their own narrow selves” (1993: 23).

moderns, he tells us, we must understand that “nature always begins with the individual” (1785: 119). Nevertheless, Herder was denying that love served to unify individuals. In fact, his goal was to articulate how there is always a remainder of individuality in the union of love. Following Aristotle, Herder affirmed the value of friendship in love. Friendship, Herder says, is the “true, sole, and most noble union of souls.” “Even love,” he continues, “serves friendship” (1785: 114). Friendship, on his account, involves a dynamic relation in which two individual’s “heart and hands are linked in *one common purpose*” (1785:113). Love is the linking of individuals, but friendship is the recognition of the each lover’s particular existence. Lovers who share friendship reveal, at once, both sides of the dialectic. So, for Herder, each individual’s consciousness grounds the very possibility of the love they share. Individuality, thus, is both the limit and the condition of love.

Interestingly, though Herder’s account was meant to preserve an individual’s experience in love, it can be read as producing the opposite effect. That is, Herder’s account detailed the conditions making possible the experience of love, yet it could not account for a key component of the actual experience of love: self-abandon. Hemsterhuis had built his theory of the satisfaction of love upon the notion of self-abandon, but neglected the reality of individual existence. Oppositely, Herder’s theory, which was structured on the significance of the modern individual, had over corrected for Hemsterhuis’ problem, leaving aside the possibility of experiencing self-abandon in love. Both thinkers used love in their attempt to solve important philosophical problems, yet their debate leaves unanswered questions: is it possible to mediate between these positions? Can love and selfhood be interpreted in a way that satisfies both positions? As we will see, Hegel’s fragment on love addresses these questions. Moreover, the problems at the heart of Herder and Hermsterhuis’ disagreement became central to Hegel’s theory of love: unity, individuality, and the role of desire in nature.

### 3.2 Schiller and the Ideal of Harmony

The name of Schiller usually evokes the image of a poet or a playwright. But he also produced significant philosophical texts. And just as love was not a foreign topic to him as a poet, neither was it distant to him as philosopher. Of particular interest are his 1786 *Theosophy of Julius* and his 1793 *On Grace and Dignity*. Importantly, his philosophical work addresses not only the questions left lingering from the debate between Herder and Hemsterhuis—indeed, Schiller described his *Theosophy* as an attempt to develop a “purer conception of love,” one that preserved individual selfhood without denying self-abandon (Henrich, 1977: 123)—but he also expanded the reach of love to the realm of ethics in *On Grace and Dignity*.

Like Hemsterhuis, Schiller’s *Theosophy* puts forward the view that everything, by nature, is drawn towards perfection. Everything in nature “possesses the common drive,” he states, “to extend [its] activity, drawing everything to [itself].” That is, everything desires “to make their own, what they recognize as good, excellent, or attractive” (1901: 389). But unlike Hemsterhuis, Schiller argues that the drive towards satisfying love is merely an inner feeling, but never a material reality. It is action that aims to extend beyond one’s finitude, one’s individuality; yet “love is only the reflection,” and not the manifestation “of this single original power” of nature (1901: 391). Love, therefore, is a perpetual inclination to act in harmony with nature. And the experience of self-abandon occurs when two lovers harmoniously desire one another—“momentarily confusing one’s being for the other.” Importantly, it is the moment of self-abandon that serves to reveal the boundaries of an individual. In other words, given that love is the constant desire to reach beyond one’s particular boundaries, love always involves a reestablishment of one’s existence as an individual. Hence, Schiller can make a pair of seemingly contradictory claims: he begins claiming that love is “perfection in nature [and] is not a property of matter”—it is spiritually distinct from material existence—yet he concludes by claiming that the attractive power of love is what “brought about the



bodily form of nature” (1901: 388; 395). This suggests that ideally love functions to unite individuals, but practically it serves to continually draw one to harmonize with, but never be subsumed within, nature. Love is, therefore, a sort of attractive power within nature that marks individuals distinct. So, like Herder, Schiller recognized that love is fully respects the limitations of individual existence.

In his *On Grace and Dignity* Schiller expanded the reach of love to the realm of ethics. That is, he put his framing of love to use in his critique of Kant’s divisions between aesthetics and morality and between inclination and duty. For Kant, moral action involved being guided by reason away from one’s mere inclinations towards the performance of one’s moral duty. Schiller, in contrast, wanted to highlight both the beauty and freedom of nature within the moral sphere. On his view, in Kant’s account coercion is inherent to moral action: in order to act upon duty reason must restrict one’s natural inclinations, thus limiting one’s freedom in natural, sensible world. That is, he saw in Kant’s ethics an unnecessary conflict between an agent’s rational and non-rational faculties. Instead, Schiller hoped to make room for the possibility of moral action rooted in grace—where grace has to do with the beauty of acting in harmony with nature: “It is in a beautiful soul that sensuousness and reason, duty and inclination are in harmony, grace is their expression as appearance” (2005: 153). Schiller was not arguing that feelings or inclinations should be the basis of moral activity; rather, his point was that moral action did not require restricting the will of one’s sensuous life: for someone fully in harmony with nature, duty itself would be an inclination.

Taking a slightly different angle than in the *Theosophy*, in *Grace and Dignity* Schiller describes love as reason’s pleasure in perceiving the reflection of its own ideas within nature. Moreover, love does not entail any sort of physical desire directed towards the sensible world—it is instead reason’s attraction to the beauty of rational ideas in nature. The feeling of this beauty (what Schiller refers to as “aesthetics”) for him bridges sense and reason, and love is the clearest realization of beauty. “Love alone,” Schiller writes, “is thus a free emotion” (2005: 166): love involves sensing the free,

creative activity of reason within the sensible world. And this appearance of freedom serves as the aesthetic impetus for morality. Importantly, however, Schiller was not claiming that love is the foundation of morals. In fact, Schiller was careful to warn that love is susceptible to deception: while it can be the most magnanimous feeling, it can also ground selfish action. Magnanimous, “because it receives nothing from its object but gives it everything, since pure intellect can only give, not receive,” yet selfish “because it is always only its own self that it seeks and appreciates in its object” (2005: 166). This dialectic recalls what he wrote in the *Theosophy*: in reaching outside of oneself through love, one also reestablishes one’s own individuality by seeing—“seeking and appreciating”—oneself in the other.

In many ways Schiller’s account can be read as an attempt to answer the questions left open by Herder and Hemsterhuis. But it is also clear that Schiller used love in his attempt to overcome the Kantian dualisms of reason/sensuousness and duty/inclination in social terms. Likewise, in *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* Hegel employs love to reconcile the same problematic dichotomies. Further, Schiller had already begun to articulate—but never fully developed—something that would later become crucial to Hegel’s notion of love: the idea that individual selfhood always involves reaching beyond oneself to include another. However, as we will see, Hegel failed to heed Schiller’s warning that love is not fit to ground modern ethics, since it is easily led into to self-deception.

### **3.3 The Post-Kantian Principle of Philosophy: Fichte and Hölderlin**

At the same time when philosophers were debating issues of modern forms of individuality and ethics, there was also a debate centered on how to move forward with Kant’s critical, philosophical system. Kant’s critical project aimed to establish philosophy as a systematic science for the first time by exploring how *a priori* knowledge of objects is possible for us. His solution brought about a so-called “Copernican revolution in epistemology,” according to which objects conform to our knowledge rather than the other way around. That is, the *a priori* forms to which knowledge

must conform lie within humans as knowing subjects. In his transcendental deduction of the categories, Kant claims that the highest form to which the content of knowledge must conform is the synthetic unity of apperception (Kant: B134n). Thus, Kant's critical endeavor placed self-consciousness as the highest principle of human knowledge. Implicit to Kant's revolution is a kind of idealism: humans have knowledge only of the *phenomenal* world of appearances, and not the *noumenal* world of things in-themselves. And what remained in Kant's system were fundamental dualisms (e.g., between: appearances and things-in-themselves; the form and content of knowledge; feeling and reason; and theoretical and practical reason).

Speaking generally, Kant's followers were inspired by his effort to establish philosophy as a science, but believed Kant was not successful; they believed his dualisms had to be overcome in order for philosophy to be unified into a system. Fichte was among the first to engage in the post-Kantian project of deriving the content of philosophy from a single principle. His goal was to locate the identity between the subjective and objective—the singular point from which both originated. Such identity, he believed, could serve as a principle for philosophy and reveal the shape of true knowledge. That is, it would be capable of expressing truth that bridged the divide of subjective experience and objective reality.

Fichte believed that self-consciousness could serve as the principle for philosophy. In the early 1790s he formulated a theory in which the "I" was a self-positing process wherein subject-object identity dwelled. For Fichte self-consciousness was a free activity—a striving for self-determination—involving (a) subjective activity and (b) consciousness of that activity. While both components are subjective in nature, the key point is that each relates to the other as an object of consciousness. Through the self-referential dynamic of (a) and (b) the "I posits itself as an I." Moreover, the identity of the "I" is not judged but is an immediate action, revealed through *intellectual intuition*. As Dieter Henrich describes it, the activity of self-reference "is not built onto an

activity that already exists: the activity comes into existence together with the knowledge of it, which means that the two elements *mutually* depend on one another” (2003: 267). Fichte believed that the moment of difference in self-consciousness was rich enough to ground a system of philosophy; and that the immediate unity of the subject and object in the “I” could resolve the fundamental Kantian dualisms.

Hegel’s friend, Hölderlin, was a leading figure in early German Romanticism, a movement wary of post-Kantian systematicity. Hölderlin studied Fichte’s work, and attended his lectures before the first edition of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* was published. Fichte, however, did not ultimately convince Hölderlin, who developed a competing idea of subject-object unity: love. Hegel almost certainly borrowed Hölderlin’s idea of love (Henrich, 1988). Thus, understanding Hegel’s use of love involves considering Hölderlin’s use of it.

At the beginning of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte characterized the principle of philosophy as an unconditioned unity from which difference emerges. The problem for Hölderlin was that Fichte was attempting to realize a contradiction. On the one hand, the identity between subject and object was supposed to be unconditioned. But on the other, the self-referential nature of self-consciousness was a conditioned relation between subject and object. For Hölderlin, Fichte was destined to fail: his principle was either a pure abstraction of consciousness, or relied on a pre-conditioned separation between subject and object.<sup>9</sup>

For Hölderlin nature was dynamic, unified living organism. His Spinoza-inspired monism held that nature was animate, always developing. Development, in turn, implied the production of difference, the emergence of new relations between objects or ideas. For Hölderlin, the fundamental unity of nature could only be comprehended given the existence of multiplicity and determination. And Hölderlin called such fundamental unity “pure Being.”

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<sup>9</sup> See his letter to Hegel for the former critique (1988: 125), for the latter: “Judgment and Being” (1988: 37-38).

Like Fichte, Hölderlin meant to capture subject-object identity. In pure Being...

...Subject and object [are] united altogether and not only in part, that is, united in such a manner that no separation can be performed without violating the essence of what is to be separated, there and nowhere else can we speak of pure Being (1988: 37).

Unlike Fichte, however, the recognition of such unity was not intellectual. Rather, it was rooted in poetry, in the sublime as an *aesthetic intuition*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, pure Being did not function as a principle for Hölderlin. Instead, it was the ground upon which thought was possible in the first place. That is, for Hölderlin, it was impossible to start with an understanding of pure Being and transcendently deduce nature. Hence, Hölderlin was critiquing more than Fichte's principle—he doubted the possibility of creating a science of philosophy at all. Moreover, for Hölderlin, Fichte's science could only produce a conception of nature as dead: in Fichte's picture, nature was without a freely self-developing form of its own and must always conform to the unity of the "I". Accordingly self-consciousness could not represent subject-object unity to Hölderlin since it was predicated on a division of pure Being.

In his own account, Hölderlin gladly affirmed the separation of subject and object as being constitutive of self-consciousness. However, he was not denying *in toto* the unity Fichte saw in the self. For Hölderlin, self-consciousness is a unified process, but is only ever a *re*-unification of an already separated subject and object. In other words, not only is self-consciousness the result of an original differentiation from unification, it is also the process of re-inscribing a derivative form of unity back onto the now-manifest differentiation of Being. But if self-consciousness is merely a derivative unity, can complete unity be achieved? For Hölderlin, the answer is no. As Henrich notes,

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<sup>10</sup> For Hölderlin, aesthetics related to "aesthetics" in both Kantian (as being sensible) and Schillerian (in relating to beauty) senses. But somewhat differently than both Schiller and Kant, Hölderlin believed aesthetic intuition was a creative power of the imagination, which he contrasted with Fichte's intellectual intuition: "I want to discover the principle which explains to me the division in which we think and exist, yet which is also capable of dispelling the conflict between subject and object, between our self and the world, yes, also between reason and revelation, — theoretically, in intellectual intuition, without our practical reason having to come to our aid. For this we need an aesthetic intuition..." (1988: 131-132). That is, Hölderlin believed that through aesthetic intuition, the theoretical operations of intellectual intuition were made objective.

Hölderlin's position is that "it is impossible to achieve complete reunification of that which has been separated...there is no way back into undifferentiated Being" (2003: 293). There is thus an unbridgeable impasse between infinite Being and finite self-consciousness. Yet, Hölderlin still sought a means of sublime unification with nature. His solution is what he called "love": the attitude of rational surrender, of giving up any conceptual determinations in the face of absolute Being.

Hegel admired the post-Kantian project spearheaded by Fichte, that of systemizing philosophy into a science. As will be shown, his writing on love can be seen as an attempt to follow Fichte in rationally synthesizing the dualisms in Kant's system. But two features of Hölderlin's Romanticism also resonated with him: (a) a vitalist view of nature, and (b) the idea of pure Being. Thus Hegel's love, alongside Hölderlin's, must also be read as an attempt to seamlessly integrate intuition and reason within life.

#### **4. Hegel's Philosophy of Love**

The range of thinkers covered in the previous section is wide, encompassing elements of thought found in Hemsterhuis and Herder, Schiller, Fichte, and Hölderlin. And the area of thought it covers is just as great: dealing with individuality, desire, ethics, feeling and reason, the unity of nature, and the principle of philosophy. What is fascinating, on the one hand, is that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the concept of love was being used, in conjunction with the concept of the self, to address all of these issues separately. But, on the other hand, it is difficult to imagine how these differing formulations of love—all of which have a different underlying problem guiding them—could be used to address all of the problems at once. Yet, when read against these coordinates, Hegel's writing on love attempts to do just that.

In this section I provide an interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of love. My purpose, however, is not simply to exposit the theory: I am biased to demonstrate that Hegel's theory of love

can be seen as a response to the variegated problematic represented by the three coordinates of thought presented above. Hegel's early writing on love can be found in his "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" and in various essay-fragments he composed during the late 1790s. I break down Hegel's thoughts on love into four pertinent themes: unification, life, longing, and love's contrast with law.

#### 4.1 Love as Subject-Object Identity

In his fragments on love, Hegel deals with the theoretical side of love. In these texts, he is concerned to illustrate that with love one can observe the deepest unity of the subject and the object. Thus, the fragments are not far removed from the work of Hölderlin and Fichte. The "unification found in [love]," Hegel wrote, "can be called a unification of subject and object, of freedom and nature, of the actual and the possible" (*MW*: 119). In the fragment "Love", Hegel narrates why the unity of subject and object in self-consciousness is not as full as their unity in love. Recall that on the Fichtean picture self-consciousness is freely self-positing. In contrast, Hegel's emphasizes that self-consciousness cannot stand alone since "nothing carries the root of its being in itself" (*ETW*: 304). Hegel is suggesting that nothing determinate exists as unconditioned. His idea is that whatever is objective already exists as an object for a subject—and not as an object purely for itself. (The same goes for the subject.) In Hegel's own words, the subject and object "exists in and for [themselves] only on the strength of an external power" (*ETW*: 304). Hegel argues that one cannot set up the philosophical principle "outside ourselves, or it would then be an object—and not in ourselves alone either, for then it would be no Ideal," it would be no principle.

Hegel's point is double. First, he is asserting that the problem with using self-consciousness as the principle of philosophy is that self-consciousness is conditioned. Here, Hegel preserves Hölderlin's point against Fichte. But he goes further. Hegel was not satisfied with the opposition in Fichte's use of the subjective "I" and objective "I": Fichte failed, according to Hegel, to unify the

transcendental subject with the empirical subject.<sup>11</sup> For Hegel, the unity of subject and object involved not merely theory but also the unity of human experience with absolute being. As he notes: “Theoretical unity is empty, meaningless without a manifold, only conceivable in relation to [practical activity]” (*MW*: 116). Absolute unity could not be left as an abstraction, but had to entail practical engagement in the world.

The idea of practical activity leads to Hegel’s second point: he sought an account of subject-object unity that had direct application. This is what he means with his claim that the Ideal cannot reside within the subject, but also not external to it. Hegel was interested in finding an absolute unity that involved relations among subjects, since subjects were not only their own objects, but also objects of other subjects. Thus, Hegel was not content to view love through the lens of Hölderlin’s aesthetic intuition—in which an individual surrenders the freedom of judgment in the face of the sublime, pure Being. Instead, Hegel wanted to grasp absolute unity as pure Being realized within the dynamic process of life: in the structure of growth in social relations. So, while Hegel was operating under many of the same terms as Fichte and Hölderlin, he had already begun separating himself from them. For him, unity was not an immediate relation to be found in either love or self-consciousness as abstractions, but had to be accomplished through the dynamic process of life and social relations. To be sure, Hegel agrees that the identity of the subject and the object is reflected in self-consciousness, but self-consciousness is not a complete form of pure identity. Love is. To grasp the way that, for Hegel, love provides an accurate picture of the union of subject and object, it is necessary to consider the relation between love and life.

#### **4.2 Love as Sensing Life in Another**

Like Herder and Hemsterhuis, as well as for Hölderlin, the notions of life and nature were central to Hegel’s thought of love. Life, in Hegel’s early writings, is the process through which an

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<sup>11</sup> This point is underdeveloped in early texts, but is explicit in Hegel’s first major publication: *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (*DS*).



original unity becomes a manifold and eventually returns to itself, folding once again into unity. “Life cannot be regarded as union or relation alone but must be regarded as opposition as well,” Hegel writes, “life is the union of union and nonunion” (*ETW*: 312).<sup>12</sup> More clearly, life involves three moments. Life (a) is organic and produces growth and therefore creates differences, or opposing forms; but (b) opposing forms are only intelligible with reference to the unity from which they arose. Thus, opposition is an internal feature of life. And (c) through the recursive nature of the relation between difference and unity, a broader picture of unity is provided, wherein differences provide the ground for greater forms of unity. Hegel gives this entire dynamic the name ‘life.’ However, the moment of the return to unity is what Hegel calls love. Hence Hegel can claim: love excludes “all oppositions” and “feelings of inequality,” and that “love alone has no limits” (*ETW*: 218, 247). Therefore, Hegel’s love is best understood as the consummate *mode of life*: it is the living process of establishing unity amid difference. And “pure life,” Hegel tells us, echoing Hölderlin, “*is being*.” In love, “things heterogeneous are most intimately connected” (*ETW*: 254, 249).

When Hegel asserts that love excludes opposition he is also declaring love to be something graspable neither by understanding—“whose relations always leave the manifold of related terms as a manifold”—nor by reason—which “opposes its determining power to what is determined.” Hegel’s thought is that, because both faculties involve the making of judgments, understanding and reason are unable to grasp love. That is, judgment necessarily involves the making of distinctions and forming limitations; love, in contrast, “neither restricts nor is restricted.” Hegel thus (following Schiller’s aesthetic account of love) concludes that love is a feeling. However, Hegel insists that it is “not a single feeling...[because] a single feeling is only a part and not the whole of life.” It is, in other words, not a single feeling because individual feelings relate to one another in the same way that composite parts relate to a whole. In contrast, love is feeling *in general*, wherein “life is present as a

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<sup>12</sup> Note: there is a moment of opposition as well as identity in love. As a relation of mutual recognition, love unites individuals without dissolving their distinct identities. I stress unity here, but emphasize difference in 3.3.

duplicate of itself *and* as a single and unified self.” In love life becomes its own subject and object in a pre-conceptual way.

Recall that for Hölderlin a complete return to unity was always impossible. In contrast, Hegel’s exposition of love involves less passivity before nature, less surrender before the sublime. This, I suggest, is because Hegel saw something of crucial importance in Fichte’s account of the striving self-consciousness. Furthermore, he was interested in the philosophical implications of the vitalist picture of nature, wanting to articulate what love was in terms of living opposition. More specifically, he was attempting to conceive of a principle of philosophy that was itself alive. In order to disclose the point at which subject and object are undifferentiated, Hegel stresses that one must illustrate the way in which such unity is complete only when life has returned to itself (*MW*: 304-5). Thus “love” is the name Hegel gives life’s full return to itself: it is “life [in the subject] sensing life [in the object],” or the “striving to annul the possibility of separation” of life from life (*ETW*: 307-8; 232).

### **4.3 Love as Longing for Self-Completion**

The theoretical claims Hegel makes regarding love anticipate the conceptual work done in the *Phenomenology*. As he later describes self-consciousness, a constitutive aspect of love is that it relates one to another through the *life* of another. Moreover, like self-consciousness, which desires self-determination, love is life’s striving for self-completion. I have been emphasizing the unifying power of love, but there is another crucial aspect. Love, being a mode of life, exists only via power of difference. Hegel’s primary example of the difference love operates upon is the physical division between individuals in love. Like Herder, Hegel insists that, as individuals, the two are physically distinguishable, but in love they are united as a broader unity, and no longer separate. In love, one lover’s self-surrender produces greater self-realization for the other—each partner’s self-negation adds further and further depth to the tangled lovers’ self-determination. “My bounty is as the sea,

my love as deep” Hegel evokes *Romeo and Juliet*, “the more I give to thee, the more I have.” He continues in his own poetic phrasing:

In love one has found oneself again in another. Since love is a unification of life, it presupposes division...a developed many-sidedness of life. The more variegated the manifold in which life is alive, the more places in which it can be reunified; the more the places in which it can sense itself, the deeper does love become (*ETW*: 278-9).

Here, Hegel provides a descriptive image of the constructive role that difference plays in love. It is this feature of love that functions to complete the union of the subject and object: it involves more than an individual self-consciousness. In a pair of lovers, each individual’s self-consciousness acts as if “against a mirror,” providing an “echo of our existence” within the organic whole of life (*MW*: 119).

However, unlike Herder, Hegel’s idea has roots in the Platonic account of love. More like Hemsterhuis, Hegel contended that love involved erotic anticipation—passionate desire—for a completeness that depends on something external to oneself. As Diotima phrases it, “love desires the Good to be *one’s own forever*” (*Sym.*, 206a). Here, love is the desire for full satisfaction in one’s longing for self-completion, a living return to unity with nature. So in Hegel’s theory there is an effort to resolve the tension left by Herder and Hemsterhuis. Individuality and unification are both necessary for love, but only together are they sufficient: love is the mirroring of one individual’s nature from another’s, the reflection of one self being incorporated into the other. And, different from Schiller’s attempt to resolve the dilemma, Hegel’s theory highlights individuality and unity as being byproducts of sociality. It is precisely for this reason that, for Hegel, an individual self-consciousness is unable to reach absolute unity on its own. Because self-consciousness is predicated on internal distinctions, it cannot by itself serve as the ground of an identity philosophy. For Hegel, subject-object identity is not only theoretical, but is something to be practically, socially performed: it occurs when equal-natured individuals encounter and reflect one another.

#### 4.4 Love and Law

The way Hegel deals with the problem of individuality and unity in love leaves a question open: what has love got to do with individuals being of equal nature? To answer this question, one must shift from thinking about Hegel's theory of love and consider the way in which he employs love practically, within the realm of ethics. The ethic of love is a central issue in his "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" (*SC*). Like most of Hegel's works, *SC* is an essay with several themes developing at once. So, for the interests at hand, it is helpful to focus specifically on the way Hegel contrasts love with law.

In many ways, *SC* is the first articulation of Hegel's dissatisfaction with Kant's ethical theory. Hegel follows Schiller in portraying Kant's ethical theory as founded upon unnecessary dualisms, and as representing a distinctively modern alternative to ancient Greek ethics. The contrast between Greek and modern is portrayed as follows. The Greeks were much more socially and intellectually innocent than moderns. That is, the Greek individual had a more harmonious relationship to their social life, since Greek society constituted the world through which the individuals obtained their identity. Moderns, in contrast, being more reflective in nature, regarded individual autonomy as central one's identity and were not as immediately related to one another. So, Greek life was thought to be more immediately harmonious while modern society was thought of as fragmented, a composition made up of isolable individuals. On Kant's theory, for example, the focus was on the demands that duty imposed upon individuals, rather than on the development of social virtues that characterized Aristotle's ethics.

Hegel agreed with Kant in theory—that the free individual is the rational individual—but he did not find Kant's position satisfactory at the practical level, since it presupposed a cleavage between inclination and reason. What Hegel sought was a position that would allow him to realize,

in the modern world, the harmony lived by the Greeks with the rationality theorized by Kant. Like Schiller, Hegel turned to love in his attempt to bridge this duality.

As I mentioned above (2.2) Schiller had attempted to use beauty as a way of joining the rational and the sensible, and love to produce an ethics that better reflected the harmony of nature. Moreover, in the place of duty, Schiller imagined that a truly beautiful, moral person would act solely from inclination. Hegel picked up Schiller's line of thought, taking it further than Schiller himself ever would. For Hegel, Jesus served as an example of the kind of beautifully moral person whose love could re-unite what had, in modern times, become separate. That is, Hegel believed the love Jesus acted upon marked the "extinction of law and duty." Contrasting Kant with Jesus, Hegel argues:

The command 'Thou shalt not kill' is a maxim which is recognized as valid for the will of every rational being and which can be valid as a principle of universal legislation. Against such a command Jesus sets the higher genius of reconcilability (a modification of love) which not only does not act counter to this law but makes it wholly superfluous; it has in itself a so much richer, more living, fullness that so poor a thing as a law is nothing for it at all. In reconcilability the law loses its form, the concept is displaced by life (*SC*, 215).

On Kant's picture, one ought not kill due to a rationally universalizable moral demand; for Hegel this view of ethics involved "self-coercion." In his own view, an individual living a life of love would not kill simply out of inclination. The demand of the law would still be met, yet it would cease to hold its power *as* law. In this way, duty becomes superfluous. Thus, the important point of disagreement Hegel had with Kant in *SC* was that Hegel did not think that Kant's picture allowed for the full freedom of the modern subject.

However, like Kant, Hegel wanted to respect the autonomy of the individual—he was not attempting to revert to Greek unity. His theoretical work on love can be seen to support his defense of individual autonomy. Love, for Hegel, is never coercive; it allows a lover to act in accordance with a beloved's needs and interests without constraining the lover's own needs and interests. It is, recall, the reflection of the subject in the object and the object in the subject. Moreover, the only way that

such relations could be established is if each individual in a loving relationship were individuals on equal grounds, of equal nature. Hegel believed that with his view of love, he could provide an ethical account of “virtues without lordship and without submission.” In short, Hegel believed that individual freedom required a network of equal-natured individuals, and that the modern freedom was realized when individual learned to treat one another with love.

### 5. From Love to Self-Consciousness

Many topics have been covered in the previous sections—in fact, *too many* to be dealt with by a single theory. So, if up to now my account has felt too far-reaching, then these first sections have been read correctly. In section 3, I designated three coordinates of thought representing philosophical ideas that had influenced Hegel in the 1790s. The ground these points covered was large: including discussions of how individuals are united, the nature of nature, how modern ethics can reflect the nature of nature, and whether or not philosophy can be founded upon a principle of subject-object unity. Then, in section 4, I demonstrated how Hegel used the idea of love to address each of these problems. The argument of the present section is that Hegel abandoned his theory of love because it could not, in fact, handle all of these problems at once.

To readers familiar with Hegel, love resembles what he later called Spirit. And indeed, Spirit is a systematizing concept for Hegel. Yet retrospectively, we know that in the *Phenomenology* it is self-consciousness—not love—that models the concept of Spirit. What is far from obvious is why Hegel’s path led him away from love. Moreover, it is not clear why (or how) self-consciousness can be thought to satisfactorily handle the problematic love had originally been grounded upon. But before getting to this second issue, I must answer the former question; and, in order to make sense of my claim that Hegel overloaded his theory of love, answering the former question involves explaining the various ways in which love failed Hegel.

## 5.1 Love's Pitfall: Modern Individuality

Already, by the end of “The Spirit of Christianity” Hegel came to conclude that a modern, love-based community would be impossible. To help make sense of this conclusion, recall that Hegel’s work on love was his initial attempt to philosophically grasp modernity’s effect on individuals. He found problematic the shape of Enlightenment subjectivity, which entails reflective rationality, autonomy, and atomism. Moreover, under this paradigm rights-based societies flourish. And such societies are predicated upon objective limitations and social separation: most notably private property, but also national citizenship and duty. Hegel saw that these limitations...

...allow no complete life, because if life is bound up with objects, it is conditioned by something outside itself, since in that event something is tacked on to life as its own which yet cannot be its property. Wealth at once betrays its opposition to love, to the whole, because it is a right caught in a context of multiple rights (*SC*: 221).

Thus, he recognized that modernity’s problematic effect on individuality was layered. Modern individuals were divided (a) within themselves because of reflective rationality; and such division was also expressed in (b) the alienation inherent to modern social relations.

Fichte’s system had taken modern individuality into account from the start. And on my account, Hegel had also been mindful of modern individuality from the beginning. And while he had started with a Hölderlinian approach to love, Hegel never meant to arrive at Hölderlin’s destination: pure Being. Rather, Hegel sought a subject-object identity that was engaged with concrete life in the world. In love, he traced the living nature of identity, through the mutual recognition of individuals, to a mediated, intersubjective form of unity.

Nevertheless Hegel had, like Hölderlin, been committed to the idea that philosophical thought must stop short of discursively laying out pure unity. Love, he believed, ‘sensed’ life intuitively, immediately. Intuition in sense alone, however, was not capable of philosophical discovery. As he (reminiscent of Herder) would come to write in the *Phenomenology*:

[L]ove itself is all the bait required to awaken the craving to bite. What is supposed to sustain that substance is not the concept, but ecstasy, not the cold forward march of the necessity of the subject matter but instead a kind of inflamed inspiration (*PS*: §7).

Hegel realized that importance of the ecstatic power of love, but came to see a contradiction in his assumption about the validity of love for philosophy. On the one hand, the feeling of love was the intuition of absolute unity. But on the other, one could only recognize love by reflecting, by thinking philosophically. Thus, Hegel realized that modern individuality required a more discursive account of individuality than love can support. Love, indeed, hinted at the complexity of modern relations, but it did not capture the details.

Hegel was coming, with dissatisfaction, to a realization that Hölderlin had been satisfied in. For Hegel, the Romantic position fell short in that (a) it claimed access to pure Being, but (b) disallowed the modern mind to account for it discursively. Hegel could not draw this conclusion. He knew that the disconnected nature of modern individuality could not be undone, and must be accommodated for because modern freedom depends upon modern individuality. Likewise, Hegel saw that his account of love could ultimately only provide philosophical knowledge of love that was splintered: “Love unites, but the lovers do not *know* of this union; when they know anything, they know it *as something severed*” (*ETW*: 291). That is, since love was incompatible with the knowledge of rational reflection, modern individuals may feel united, but could only be conscious of their love *as* divided, and thus not as love at all. So, the unification provided in love gained the modern individual no ground: individuals—known to be separated from a whole—would merely be known as severed from a whole.

## **5.2 From Modern Individuality to Modern Sociality**

The fact that individuals in love could only be known as severed from the whole left unresolved a central problem Hegel had hoped love could resolve: how individuals could be known—and not simply felt—to be united. Moreover, this problem bled into his work on ethics,



creating problems for his account of modern social relations. Even in *SC*, Hegel recognized that he was writing himself into a dead-end. By the end of the essay, he concludes by declaring that it is not possible for modern societies to be united in love:

The longing [for unity] remains unsatisfied because even in its highest dreams, even in the transports of the most finely organized love-breathing souls, it is always confronted by the individual, by something objective and exclusively personal.

Hegel realized that the beauty, the power, of Jesus' love could not repair the fractured nature of modern society. Jesus and the disciples lived during a time when the division between individual and society were, in his words, "more like a vague hovering between spirit and reality...both of which were separated, but not so irrevocably" as they were for moderns. In fact, he goes as far to say that the fundamental opposition Jesus' love was meant to synthesize never occurs in life; that one could "shake off such opposition...only in death" wherein all the activities and distinctions of life dissipate.

Thus, because love failed to bind modern individuals, it would also fail to complete the task he gave it in the ethical realm: to render duty superfluous in the modern world. The reason being that in order to act lovingly towards another—to be naturally inclined to act according to another's needs and interests without constraining one's own—one would need some sort of knowledge regarding the needs or interests of the other. The problem with Hegel's ethics of love was that if love could ultimately only be felt by modern individuals, then one's loving inclinations could nonetheless lead one to act unethically. Yet this is the problem Schiller had so clearly warned against: love could not serve as the basis of an ethics, since someone in love can easily be deceived into acting selfishly. Hegel had been inspired by Schiller's use of love, but had not been content to stop where Schiller did. From Schiller's point of view, love was related to the feeling of beauty; Hegel admitted that love was a feeling, but his search was for a modern,

rational account of love. Thus, because his search was unsuccessful, his ethics of love got no further than Schiller's.

### **5.3 The Problem of Reflective Rationality**

Ultimately, Hegel came to realize that love was a paradox, or as he calls it, “a miracle”: it unites subject and object, but the entire enterprise hinges upon ineliminable difference. As I have shown in the two previous sections, Hegel's theory of love failed to account for modern forms of individuality on two levels: at the theoretical level and at the practical level of social relations. The root problem in Hegel's work on love, however, was his method. On the one hand, he acknowledged the Romantic idea that love expresses a principle that exceeds possible knowledge. And on the other hand, he was attempting, like a critical philosopher, to obtain knowledge of the unifying function of love (despite his admission that the modern mind could know the unity of love). This tension, which Hegel built his theory of love upon—the parallel pressures of Romanticism and post-Kantian criticism—is the tension that it collapsed between.

In his early work on love, the deep conflict between, e.g. the finite and the infinite, was inassimilable to his philosophy. Prior to the *Phenomenology* his method remained incomplete: he could not conceive of love as conforming to reason, nor imagine the absolute identity as having a rational structure. As he matured, he devised a more complete dialectic that took into account the strictures of modern individuality. If unity itself was rational, he had to express it conceptually before recognizing its experience.

Thus, Hegel had made a breakthrough: like nature, the principle of philosophy must be conceived as a living process. Yet, from his point of view, both Fichte and Hölderlin's methods led to lifelessness. From the Romantic point of view, which longed for an immediate relation to Being, self-consciousness could not be philosophy's principle since it produced dead nature. From the critical perspective, which acknowledged the rational structure of modern individuality, love only

appeared to establish the living bond it promised. Thus, Hegel had to reformulate his position. In order to make sense of philosophy as a science, Hegel had to incorporate the free spontaneity of autonomous individuals into his system. Hegel had to learn to take seriously Fichte's concept of an individual's striving for self-determination, and not merely the striving of nature in general. The purely abstract striving of nature produced contradiction in love: any thought of love nullifies love; since love transcends rationality, it fractures the union of thought and objectivity. In a system based on love, "spiritual and worldly action can never dissolve into one" (*ETW*: 301). The problem was that love fails to find full satisfaction in reflecting upon itself. What he needed, therefore, was model of subject-object unity that accounted for (a) the living dynamic of nature, and (b) the capacity of self-reflection. Thus, Hegel's move back to self-consciousness probably seemed like the only answer: self-consciousness, as he imagines it, is the very activity of something living reflecting upon—desiring—itself.

## 6. Self-Consciousness in the *Phenomenology*

At the outset of this essay I described my argument as an archeological dig operating on three levels. So far, I have cleared the base level by locating the philosophical coordinates of thought according to which Hegel assembled his theory of love. I then offered, as the next level, a reading of Hegel's theory of love as it rested upon the base. Yet, I also argued that because the coordinates of thought were too widespread that Hegel's work on love was ultimately unsuccessful. My reading involves taking love as philosophical in its own right, and not merely as a set of early theological writings, or religious writings that do not reflect his later philosophical interests. Doing so allows readers to understand the philosophical concern that love addresses. I do not mean to downplay the import that Christianity and morality have in Hegel's early writings. Rather, my aim is to emphasize the philosophical themes that have been downplayed and that remain significant in the *Phenomenology*.

On the one hand, love was Hegel's attempt to unify the Kantian duality of nature and freedom while respecting the goals of Fichte's critical, scientific project. On the other hand, Hegel (influenced by Schiller and Hölderlin) was also attempting to synthesize the Kantian duality of feeling and reason. While his project of love did not succeed, in my reading the project is continuous with his later philosophical aims. Second, I have exposed the relation between love and self-consciousness. That is, I have illustrated that Hegel used love as a response to specific concerns vis-à-vis self-consciousness: he saw the fractured nature of modern individuality, and hoped that loving mutual recognition would dissolve the alienation internal to oneself and between oneself and one's neighbor. Thus, he sought an account of subject-object unity that was living, and could reflect on its own complex nature.

I now begin the work of my third, and final, level: demonstrating that love aids in understanding Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*. I posit that Hegel's concept of self-consciousness is love-like; in doing so, I clear away an under-utilized inroad to Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*: life. In the introduction to the section on self-consciousness (*PS*: §166-177) Hegel introduces the notion of life. Curiously, his discussion of life takes up a majority of Chapter IV's introduction (§168-174). Robert Pippin has suggested that the difficulty of this section matches that of any passage in Hegel's corpus: "The whole section on life is among the most opaque of any passages in Hegel (which is saying something)" (2011: 33). In addition to the extreme difficulty of the passage, the problem is that the most interesting claims Hegel makes about self-consciousness are enmeshed in Hegel's discussion of life: that "self-consciousness is *desire* itself," that "self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness," and that with self-consciousness "the concept of *spirit* is on hand for us." Thus, understanding Hegel's idea of life is key to grasping the motivation behind these famous claims. I argue that Hegel's view of life and his aims with love are invaluable when making sense of what Hegel claims at the beginning of Chapter IV.

## 6.1 The Dual Moments of Self-Consciousness

At the start of Chapter IV Hegel makes a provocative claim: “self-consciousness is *desire* itself” (*PS*: §167). Nothing in the pages leading up to §167 has been said to equip readers to easily follow this claim. Using love as a guide, there are two points that I want to develop. First, I make clear exactly what Hegel is calling desire. Second, (in 5.2) I clarify the relation of life and desire.

Like the Fichtean account, Hegel’s account of self-consciousness involves two “moments.” In Hegel’s description there is (a) the moment of mere consciousness, wherein “the whole breadth of the sensuous world is preserved.” This moment captures one’s relation to objects of sensation, perception, and understanding—or, one’s first-personal consciousness of the empirical world taken as objective for consciousness. The second moment is when (b) consciousness takes itself as its own object. That is, the second moment can be thought of as second-order reflection: conscious awareness of one’s own consciousness of the world. Importantly, the object of the second moment is the first moment itself. Between these two moments there is tension. Both moments have their own object, what they take to be “true.” The first moment takes the world of appearances to represent what is true. The second moment takes the first moment—i.e., *itself*—as the truth. However, since Hegel is not introducing the moments as unified, the second moment is immediately aware that its object is itself. Thus, the dual moments of consciousness are not, in and of themselves, constitutive of self-consciousness. Rather self-consciousness is the relation that unifies them.

Instead of thinking of the moments of consciousness as contradicting one another, Hegel’s account treats them as antipodal points of a single process: self-consciousness. As he puts it, “self-consciousness is the movement in which this antithesis [between the dual objects of consciousness] is removed” (*PS*: §167). That is, self-consciousness occurs when the two moments mutually reflect upon one another, and each comes to identify with the other. Self-consciousness, thus, is the

unifying, dynamic relation between the two moments. The dynamic in which one moment recognizing itself in the other is what Hegel calls desire.

Already, there is similarity with love. His theory of love was an attempt to articulate the unity of the subject and object. With self-consciousness, the two moments self-determine their broader identity. Analogous to his maintaining of the identities of individual lovers, Hegel preserves the unique identity of each moment of consciousness within self-consciousness. He is not satisfied to account for self-consciousness in the (Fichtean) formulation “I am I.” Such a formula, Hegel calls a “motionless tautology” in which no distinctions can be made at all. Thus, what remains from his theory of love is the necessary moment of difference-in-unity.

## 6.2 Desire and Life

Upon clarifying what Hegel refers to as desire, there arises a second question: “what has desire got to do with life?” Hegel first makes the claim that self-consciousness is desire at the end of §167. He then re-states it at the end of §174. Importantly, between these sections Hegel conducts his complicated discussion of life. Like life, self-consciousness is not motionless. Rather, like love, it is a living relation between two moments that initially seem antithetical. Self-consciousness is the movement in which the opposed moments of consciousness reflect upon one another “as in a mirror” (to use his early language). And in reflecting—in the process of self-determination—their opposition is transformed into unification. And in the “reflective turn into itself, [self-consciousness] object has become *life*” (§168). That is, as desire, consciousness becomes “a *living* self-consciousness” (PS: §176).

Previously (in 3.2), I claimed that love was best understood as a mode of life. What I meant was that love was the living process of striving for unity in difference. Now, self-consciousness—as desire—fulfills this function. Hegel is paying heed to the Romantic insight that nature is not mechanistic, but is vitally alive. He could not make progress in developing a science of philosophy,

if, like Fichte, he required nature to conform to the shape of the “I”. Rather, he had learned that the living dynamic of nature *was itself* self-consciousness’ capacity for self-reflection. Hence, with his claim that self-consciousness is desire, Hegel is fusing the parallel pressures under which his theory of love collapsed (in 4.2).

In Hegel’s early work, love was described as the unity of being: a subject’s “sensing of what is living in” in its object and in the “striving to annul” the separation between the subject and the object. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel uses a similar pattern to describe life (*PS*: §168-171). But instead of locating the unity first in the social realm, he locates it within the life of desire of self-consciousness, which he calls “being reflected into itself.” Desire, it seems, has become Hegel’s term to indicate the mode of life wherein subject and object reflect upon, and are given the means to identify with, one another. In order to make this point clearer, it is necessary to examine the details of Hegel’s discussion of life in Chapter IV.

### **6.3 Self-Consciousness and the Genus of Life**

Echoing the moments of life I exposed in Hegel’s early writings, in the *Phenomenology* life is said to “resolve itself in the following moments” (*PS*: §169). The first moment is (a) what he calls “essence.” Essence is life as a boundless realm in which no distinctions whatsoever can be made: “it is infinity as the sublation of all distinctions...its own being at rest as absolutely restless infinity.” Without having read his earlier work on love, this description is puzzling. And it should be—the idea conveys the thought of an existence in which all contrast is dissolved. I maintain that this first moment is akin to what Hölderlin had called pure Being—a pure abstraction of life. In other words, (a) serves to convey the all-pervasive, self-sufficient nature of Being. Think, for example, of the classical Parmenidean idea:

There remains one word to express the true road: Is. On this road there are many signs that What Is has no beginning and never will be destroyed: it is whole, still, and without end. It neither was nor will be, it simply is (Wheelwright, 1960).

In this moment of life, being appears fixed and any knowledge of it is intuitive, immediate.

But there is another way of understanding life. Contra Parmenides, there is the Heraclitean perspective: “Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives way and nothing stays fixed” (Wheelwright, 1960). Hegel had earlier recognized this other moment of life as the “eternal separation in nature” (*MW*: 120). And in the *Phenomenology*, he refers to this moment as (b) “the infinity of distinctions” (*PS*: §171). Whereas in (a) life is viewed as a motionless abstraction of Being, in (b) life is viewed as an endless process of Becoming. With love, this moment of life prompted him to search for subject-object identity in the plurality of the world. The emphasis was on the endless possibility of distinctions that love was able to reconcile. In the *Phenomenology*, life is both (a) motionless Being, and (b) “that simple fluid substance of the pure movement within itself.” Thus, change in life appears to be as equally self-sufficient as the pure abstraction of life in Being. The two perspectives on life are vastly different. Yet, in the two moments of consciousness Hegel utilizes the tension between them to unite them as one in self-consciousness.

Further complicating the picture, Hegel states that there is (c) a “topsy-turvy inversion” that occurs where one moment gets confused with the other. Inversion occurs when the universality emphasized in (a) becomes observable in the particularity highlighted in (b). Consider again the example of the difference between Parmenidean being and Heraclitean becoming. Hegel is implying that permanent Being, from one perspective, appears to be stable and durable; but such permanence is only observable through change. Likewise, on the surface, constant process always produces new expressions of difference; yet, comprehending change requires recognizing an object as existing through change. Thus, the idea (c) conveys is that the simplicity of the original essence becomes estranged from itself when the possibility of distinction is not recognized at its core. In other words, the particularity of beings—rather than the abstraction, Being—can be taken as that which exists in-itself. Hegel describes the dynamic using the language of consumption. In the process of life, “what



is consumed is essence [a], and as a result, individuality [b], in preserving itself at the expense of the universal and giving itself the feeling of its unity with itself, straightaway sublates its opposition to the other by virtue of which it exists for itself.” That is, in (c): (b) begins to play the role of (a), and (a) begins to serve the purpose of (b). As a result, “both aspects of the entire movement, which had been distinguished, collapse into one another.” Such is the process of the constant striving of nature.

Important to note is that the moments of life mirror the moments of self-consciousness. That is, the twin moments of consciousness run parallel to moments (a) and (b) of life; and the moment of identity between the two moments of consciousness, the “topsy-turvy inversion” of life. For this reason, Hegel introduces the idea of the “genus of life” in relation to self-consciousness: self-consciousness is a form of life. That is, it is a way that life expresses itself as capable of both self-reflection and modern, rational reflection. The life of nature, in love, was capable of neither capacity. Love could not fully reflect on itself, but was only capable of imparting the feeling of unity. In self-consciousness, however, life fully expresses the self-reflective rationality of desire in general. That is, self-consciousness is the form of life whose nature involves self-determination via self-reflection on the manifold distinctions that life produces. In other words, the movement of the striving of nature *is* the movement of self-conscious desire, which involves rational awareness of the need for self-determination. Thus, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel has devised an account of self-consciousness that is—unlike love—fit for the service of critical philosophy. Further, his account—unlike Fichte’s “I”—integrates self-consciousness within life itself. In short, self-consciousness has taken over the role of love in a philosophically satisfying way.

#### **6.4 A Love-Like Account of Self-Consciousness**

As with love, and with self-consciousness, none of the single moments represent the process of life itself:

The whole cycle constitutes life. It is neither what is first expressed...nor is it the durably existing shape of what exists for itself discretely, nor is it the pure process of all this, nor again is

it the simple gathering of these moments. Rather it is the whole developing itself, then dissolving its development, and, in this movement, being the simple whole sustaining self. (*PS*: §171)

With love, life was a constant process of expanding—striving to posit itself via differences—and contracting—realizing itself through the universality of the manifold. A parallel process occurs in the *Phenomenology*. Previously, love served as a mode of life, illustrating the living unity of subject and object. Now, Hegel illustrates not only the unity, but also a full recognition of the structure of unity, via self-consciousness.

The reason Hegel puts such an emphasis on life in Chapter IV relates to the reason he discussed life in his early writings on love. Previously, Hegel adopted the theory of love because, agreeing with Hölderlin, he saw Fichte’s principle as a motionless abstraction, which forced nature to lifelessly conform to the “I”. For Fichte, “there can be no thought of a synthesis [of nature and freedom]” Hegel had stated, “for the polarity of nature and freedom is fixed and absolute. Absolute identity cannot find or establish itself [in self-consciousness]” (*DS*: 151). For Hegel, a lifeless vision of nature would not do: he had already absorbed the Romantic insight that identity between subject and object had to account for the living status of nature. But, in working on love, Hegel ran into problems that forced him to take seriously the post-Kantian notion that the identity of self-consciousness was fundamental to creating philosophy as science.

### **6.5 What About Intuition and Duty?**

Of all the coordinates from which Hegel wrote on love, the only topic that does not explicitly figure into Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology* is ethics, the attempt to synthesize inclination with duty. However, ethics—or, social relation very broadly—is an implicit concern of the chapter. Indeed, in the section immediately after §177 is the famous “Master-Slave dialectic” which Hegel uses to illustrate the dependence, or relation of mutual recognition, that an individual self-consciousness has on another self-consciousness. And, as Hegel describes, the relation of dependence between the pair of self-consciousness individuals is the beginning of the historical

development of reason and ethical relations. So, while the ethical dimension of love does not pertain directly to the section I have been addressing, it is not irrelevant.

It is precisely because Hegel came to consider historical development important for the development of philosophy itself, that self-consciousness was more adequate than love was when dealing with such a wide set of problems. With self-consciousness, the various issues of subject-object unity, modern individuality, and eventually ethics get dealt with one by one, as they arise for consciousness. Oppositely, Hegel's work on love, while it acknowledged social relations, had an ahistorical tone: love had to deal with all of its problems at once, or not at all. For example, in Chapter IV Hegel is not merely attempting to prove that conscious subjects always eventually become self-conscious subjects. He is additionally concerned with illustrating the fact that after a subject emerges from the self-referential cycle of "desire in general" there arises a dependence on other human subjects. Thus, the issues of desire, individuality, life, and the relation shared between individuals are dealt with progressively. With love, in contrast, Hegel had naïvely attempted to run all the concepts at once.

Moreover, the historical method that Hegel established in the *Phenomenology*, and in Chapter IV specifically, relates directly to critique of Kant's ethics he began in his work on love. For Kant, reason provides systematic unity as an external form of the sensible world of nature. The externality of Kant's form of unity is bound up with the ahistorical and the asocial nature of the Kantian account of reason. In Hegel's account, systematic unity is something that develops historically, through the living processes of the social interactions of self-conscious beings. Therefore, reason is, for Hegel, always already rooted in history and the development of social forms. Thus, in Chapter IV, Hegel describes the transition of the human animal out of nature into the human subject capable of reason. Because the possibility of reason is a result of this transition, Hegel's account of ethics is better suited to allow natural inclinations to merge with the duty of reason—which is exactly what

he had hoped love could have accomplished.

## 7. Conclusion

Hegel's theory of self-consciousness has been hugely influential to a variety of movements. It is, therefore, no surprise that someone who knows only one thing about Hegel know something of his view of self-consciousness. Indeed, his most famous passage, "Master-Slave Dialectic," comes just after the text this essay has been dealing with. Were this essay longer, it would be possible to illustrate the commonalities shared between, on the one hand, the power dynamic between the master and the slave; and on the other hand, two individuals in love that recognize the need they have for one another. In both cases, it takes the recognition of the other to fully realize one's own self. Moreover, the argument I have made—that Hegel's account of self-consciousness is founded upon the same as Hegel's early writing on love, which are philosophically (not only theologically) important in their own right—pertains not merely to the *Phenomenology*, but Hegel's later writing as well. In fact, in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel explicitly connects love with self-consciousness:

Love means in general the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not isolated on my own, but gain my self-consciousness only through the renunciation of my independent existence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me (*PR*: §158, Addition).

Still, Hegel's view of love fell short of the demands of his early philosophical project.

Most commonly Hegel's writing on love is treated as if it were merely a failed precursor to his philosophy of Spirit, or that he eventually abandoned his grand hope for a love-based community and demoted love to the familial sphere. In my view, both approaches offer valuable insights, but leave important work undone: they inadequately account for the philosophical continuity between his early and later work. In order to make this argument, I found it necessary to resituate Hegel's love: rather than being viewed as primarily relating to his interests in Christianity and morality, it must also be read as equally involving his interests in post-Kantian criticism and

Romanticism. Thus, this essay was not meant merely as interpretation or commentary on §166-177 of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. I have also offered a key to more fully understanding not only his early writing on love, but also the motivation of the confusing statements Hegel makes about life and desire in the *Phenomenology*.

Before the *Phenomenology* Hegel valued the Kantian-Fichtean idea that self-consciousness was a freely developing process, yet rejected the critical claim that it was the principle of philosophy. In order to avoid what he saw as Fichte's error, Hegel turned to a Romantic insight: nature was not deterministic; it was, like the Kantian-Fichtean subject, alive. He originally thought love was an adequate substitution. Yet, as he worked through the idea he realized that love, since it was only feeling, was incapable of self-reflection. Hence, love could not serve as the foundation of a science of philosophy. Hegel therefore returned to the Kantian-Fichtean subject he initially rejected, but not without moving beyond it. Hegel's theory of self-consciousness has the structure of love—but since it is self-conscious, the unity of subject and object achieves self-awareness without destroying itself. Although Hegel abandoned his early theory of love, it contains the philosophical motivation underlying the claims about desire, satisfaction, and the concept of Spirit in Chapter IV.

The *Phenomenology* is a work of post-Kantian criticism, yet remains—despite the sharply anti-Romantic rhetoric it contains—among Hegel's most Romantic texts. This is because Hegel's account of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* involves his synthesizing the critical concern with (i) the internal tensions of modern subjectivity, with the Romantic notion of (ii) the free, living activity of nature. Crucially, both points were the target of Hegel's early theory of love—and, as I have illustrated, both are central to Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology*.

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