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Fichte and Hegel on Recognition and Slavery

David James

In Hegel's Jena-period writings are to be found some extended critical discussions of Fichte's philosophy. These writings include his *Differenzschrift* from 1801, in which the foundation of Fichte's system is said to be the identity of subject and object achieved in the 'pure thinking of itself' of self-consciousness that finds expression in the statement of identity $I = I$ (*Ich = Ich*).¹ This identity of self-consciousness is contrasted with the moment of non-identity encountered in the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness. Fichte uses the term the 'not-I' (*nicht-Ich*) to designate this object which the I posits in opposition to itself and which must be introduced to explain the possibility of consciousness of the world. According to Hegel, Fichte's philosophical system ultimately fails to overcome the opposition between the identity of the 'pure' or 'transcendental' consciousness of the first principle of his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* that the I posits itself absolutely and the non-identity of its second principle that the I posits absolutely something opposed to itself.

According to Hegel, although Fichte tries to bring about a synthesis of these two principles by means of the third principle that in the I a divisible I is opposed to a divisible not-I, his failure to explain this synthesis results in pure self-consciousness and its pure self-knowledge standing opposed to an infinite objective world and knowledge of this world. For Hegel, this unresolved opposition between the 'subjective I' and the 'objective I' is not a purely cognitive matter, for he implies that this separation of subject and object together with their opposition to each other are unnatural, in the sense that the subject and object are ultimately identical with each other and thus belong together at the same time as they are non-identical. Yet Fichte is unable to comprehend this non-identity in such a way that the self-conscious subject is able to know itself in the object and thereby identify itself with it. The subjective I must, therefore, experience a sense of alienation through its being confronted by something that it takes to be entirely other than itself.

Hegel speaks of a need for philosophy generated by the type of division or 'diremption' (*Entzweiung*) typical of modern culture, and which manifests itself in forms of opposition that include this one between absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity – indeed, this opposition is the most fundamental one – and he identifies the unique interest of reason with the attempt to suspend or 'sublate' (*aufzuheben*) such oppositions.² This cannot be achieved, however, by means of a purely theoretical relation to the object. Rather, a

practical relation to the object must also be established, as Fichte himself maintains in his *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* when he claims that there is a necessary transition from the theoretical standpoint in which the I posits itself as determined by the not-I to the practical standpoint in which the I posits itself as determining the not-I. This practical need helps explain Hegel's claim that in Fichte's system: 'The I does not find itself in its appearance [*Erscheinung*], or in its positing; it must annul [*zernichten*] its appearance in order to find itself as I. The essence of the I and its positing do not coincide: *I does not become objective to itself*'.³

As well as forming part of Hegel's critique of Fichte's philosophy, we shall see that this idea of a practical need and the relation between subject and object that explains the existence of this need also play a central role in Hegel's account of the attempt made by self-consciousness to posit itself as identical with the object of its consciousness in the struggle for recognition provided in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* from 1807. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel develops the idea of a practical need to overcome the opposition between subject and object by showing how this need results in an attempt on the part of the subjective I to destroy the object confronting it. This attempt to overcome the opposition between subject and object fails, however, and Hegel introduces the concept of recognition to explain how this opposition can be overcome. This appeal to the concept of recognition is another sign of the importance of Fichte's influence on Hegel, because this concept plays a central role in Fichte's deduction of the concept of right (*Recht*), which forms the first main division of his *Foundations of Natural Right* (§§ 1-4). It is arguably in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, then, and especially in Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition and how can be overcome, that we encounter his most productive engagement with Fichte's philosophy.⁴

In the first section of this essay I show how Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition can be explained in terms of the role that Fichte accords to recognition in his deduction of the concept of right and, in particular, in terms of a problem to which this deduction gives rise. In the second section, I show how Hegel seeks to resolve this problem by means of his account of the struggle for recognition. Finally, in the third section, I show how Fichte's and Hegel's claims concerning the necessity of *mutual* recognition do not prevent them from regarding slavery as justified in certain circumstances, or at least as being as much the fault of the person enslaved as the person who has enslaved him or her, despite the fact that slavery represents one of the clearest possible examples of a situation in which mutual recognition is absent. One may therefore question the extent to which they regard mutual recognition as an absolutely fundamental norm of social relations. There is the

difference, however, that Hegel's position appears to be that mutual recognition becomes such a norm in the course of history, whereas Fichte implies that the absence of mutual recognition may be justified simply whenever an individual has failed to raise him- or herself to the level of a being whose attitude towards him- or herself as demonstrated through his or her actions is proof of a status that demands recognition from others.

Recognition

The struggle for recognition forms part of Hegel's account of self-consciousness. This account begins with the pure identity of subject and object in which 'there is indeed an otherness; that is to say, consciousness makes a distinction, but one which at the same time is for consciousness *not* a distinction'.⁵ Rather, the object (or content) of consciousness is simply the I which is conscious of itself and has become conscious of itself through its own act of thinking itself. In other words, the I *qua* subject of consciousness *produces* itself *qua* object of its own consciousness through the act of thinking itself. As Hegel puts it, 'the "I" is the *content* of the connection and the connecting itself. Opposed to an other, the "I" is its own self, and at the same time it overarches this other which, for the "I", is equally only the "I" itself'.⁶ The active terms in which Hegel describes this unity of subject and object within self-consciousness ('the "I" is ... the connecting itself Opposed to an other, the "I" ... at the same time ... overarches this other') seek to draw attention to the essential nature of the act of self-positing as already described by Fichte.

For Fichte, the act of self-positing performed by the I is an act that is more fundamental than any other conscious act, because each and every other such act must be thought to be conditioned by this prior act, in the sense that every conscious act presupposes a subject or agent that performs it. Fichte identifies this 'original' act of the I with the concept of the I (GA I/6: 214-216; IWL, 44-46). The I is, in fact, to be understood as identical with the act by means of which it constitutes or 'posits' itself, and it does not, therefore, exist prior to and independently of this same act. Rather, the I's existence cannot be separated from the act of self-constitution performed by the I itself, which means that the I 'is at once the agent [*das Handelnde*] and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action [*Handlung*] and deed [*That*] are one and the same' (GA I/2: 259; SK, 97).

The idea that the I posits itself is meant to highlight, then, the way in which its own existence is immediately given through its act of thinking itself, so that, '*To posit oneself and to be* are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical' (GA I/2: 260; SK, 99). The I that posits itself in this way is only a subjective I, however, since it is confronted with something other

than itself, a not-I, which it itself necessarily posits through an act of counter-positing. This not-I is therefore not completely independent of the I. Rather, each and every object of consciousness *qua* representation exists only in virtue of the unity of self-consciousness which is the condition of any act of representing whatsoever, and in this respect the I itself posits the not-I. Thus, although such an object of consciousness must be posited in order to explain the possibility of consciousness, the object of consciousness lacks genuine independence and reality. This helps explain why Hegel speaks of it as a matter of appearance.⁷

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* this moment of non-identity represents a problem precisely because it reduces knowledge to knowledge of appearances only and therefore lacks the status of true knowledge. This cognitive failure takes a practical form, in that the absence of the unity of subject and object, a unity in which both the identity and non-identity of these moments of knowledge are somehow maintained, generates the need, and thereby the drive or urge (*Trieb*),⁸ to overcome the opposition between subject and object so as to reach the stage of true knowledge. In particular, self-consciousness seeks to satisfy this desire to overcome the opposition between itself and the object of its consciousness by means of a particular type of action, namely, that of removing the object's independence by means of the act of consuming it. This way of establishing its identity with the object is, however, predicated on the existence of an independent object that can be destroyed in such a way as to establish the subject's identity with it, whereas if the independence of the object were simply denied altogether, there would only be the immediate unity of self-consciousness. The object together with the desire to consume it must therefore be constantly reproduced. This is, in effect, to grant the necessity of the object's independence in the face of self-consciousness, and thus to acknowledge the absolute non-identity of subject and object.⁹ This process, through which the subject must repeatedly overcome the independence of the object, relates to a general criticism that Hegel makes of Fichte's philosophy, which is that it generates a demand in the form of a moral postulate (*ein Sollen*) whose fulfilment must be perennially postponed simply because its goal, by its very nature, can never be realized.¹⁰

According to Hegel, this problem can only be solved if the independence of the object is removed by means of an act of self-negation on the part of the object. Self-consciousness can, in short, 'achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself'.¹¹ Yet what would represent such an act of self-negation? In attempting to answer this question, one might point to an essential contrast with desire. In the case of desire, self-consciousness stands in a purely causal relation to the object, whereas in the case of this act

of self-negation there is no direct causal relation. Rather, the other or object of self-consciousness freely performs the act of negation as opposed to simply being acted upon by the subject confronting it. It must, therefore, be a special kind of object, that is to say, one that is capable of performing this act of self-negation.

Hegel identifies the essential characteristics of this act of self-negation when he states that: 'Consciousness has for its object one which, of its own self, posits its otherness or difference as a nothingness, and in so doing is independent'.¹² This statement tells us that the act of self-negation on the part of the object involves freely treating all differences between itself and the self-consciousness of which it is the object as somehow irrelevant or non-existent, and that doing so is a sign of the object's independence. This act of abstracting from all particular differences establishes an identity of the subject and the object of consciousness, in the sense that the former can regard the latter as being essentially the same as itself and, consequently, as not entirely other than itself. This identity must be achieved, however, in such a way that the object of consciousness retains its independence, for otherwise the identity in question would collapse into a mere self-identity of the subjective I, in which the moment of opposition between the subjective I and the objective I that is essential to explaining consciousness would be lost.

Fichte's account of mutual recognition as a necessary condition of self-consciousness in the *Foundations of Natural Right* helps explain this act of self-negation in such a way as to incorporate the essential characteristics of this act described by Hegel. This leaves us with the question, however, as to why Hegel situates the act of self-negation on which mutual recognition depends within an account of a struggle for recognition, instead of arguing that this act of self-negation is by itself sufficient to establish the type of relation of mutual recognition that he himself describes as follows: 'this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence'.¹³ This question becomes more pressing because Hegel describes the immediate outcome of this struggle for recognition in terms of a relation in which domination is clearly present. Fichte's account of recognition also provides the key to explaining this feature of Hegel's account of recognition. This time, however, it is because Hegel is seeking to resolve a problem that arises in connection with Fichte's deduction of the concept of right in so far as this deduction treats recognition as a necessary condition of a certain type of self-consciousness.

Fichte's deduction of the concept of right consists in an attempt to explain the possibility of self-consciousness in the form of the consciousness of oneself as a free and

rational agent capable of realizing one's ends by effecting changes in the material world with which one is immediately confronted. In other words, the I posits itself by means of its world-directed purposive activity. The I in question is a finite one whose activity is necessarily constrained by the object upon which it acts ('a world') because it is able to reflect only upon something limited (GA I/3: 329; FNR, 18-19). This particular act of self-positing is therefore one that underlies the I's everyday conscious experience of itself as a rational being that wills in accordance with its representations of objects that limit its activity at the same time as it purposively acts upon them. By achieving this consciousness of itself as free and rational in relation to an independent object confronting it, a rational being overcomes the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness at the same time as the independence of the object confronting it is acknowledged. In the first main division of the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte goes further than this, however, by setting out an argument which purports to demonstrate that self-consciousness requires an object that *qua* object is independent of the subject but *qua* object of *self*-consciousness is not purely external to the subject. It is, in fact, identical with self-consciousness in the sense that it reflects what the subject itself essentially is, that is to say, self-determining. What we have is, in effect, a practical expression of the identity of subject and object presupposed by any conscious experience whatsoever, but which, as the condition of any such experience, can itself never become a direct object of experience.

In the course of his deduction of the concept of right, Fichte comes to identify the object of consciousness with a 'summons' (or 'request', 'demand', 'invitation' as the German word *Aufforderung* can also be translated), by means of which the subject is determined to be self-determining (GA I/3: 342; FNR, 31). Here the subject's activity is constrained by an independent object at the very same time as it remains self-determining. The second aspect of the summons is essential to Fichte's account of how the following challenge can be met: given that the object of consciousness must be thought to be independent of the I, how can one reconcile the idea of a self-determining act on the part of a rational being that finds external confirmation of itself in the object of its consciousness with the idea of an independent object which stands opposed to this rational being and limits its activity?

Fichte attempts to deal with this question by claiming that the summons presupposes both the capacity to act freely in accordance with ends on the part of the subject to which it is addressed and an understanding of what it means to act in such a way on the part of the subject that summons another subject to engage in free activity. Consequently, not only the subject to which the summons is addressed but also the subject that summons another subject

to act freely must be assumed to be free and rational (GA I/3: 345; FNR, 35). Here we begin to see why the recognition in question must be *mutual*. Fichte goes on to determine the precise nature of the relation between finite rational beings that this type of recognition entails. This relation is held to be one in which the freedom of each person is limited by the freedom of other persons in such a way that each person is left free to act within the limits granted to him or to her by others. This form of mutual limitation demands that each person is both a subject that summons others by means of an act of self-limitation and the object of a summons in the sense that others limit their activity in relation to it. Only by summoning others can each person demonstrate that he or she is a free and rational being to which a summons can be directed, and conversely it is only by being the object of such a summons that consciousness of oneself as a free and rational being becomes possible.

Here the mutual nature of recognition becomes explicit: if I am to ‘posit’ myself as free and rational I must ‘summon’ others, and I can do this only by recognizing their identity with me in the sense of acknowledging that they are free and rational beings, just as I conceive of myself as such a being. It is not, however, a matter of exercising a purely causal influence on others with the aim of producing certain effects. Rather, ‘the relation of free beings to each other is a relation of reciprocal interaction through intelligence and freedom. One cannot recognize the other if both do not mutually recognize each other; and one cannot treat the other as a free being, if both do not mutually treat each other as free’ (GA I/3: 351; FNR, 42). The freedom in question is therefore not equivalent to the freedom that consists in abstracting from any natural, given determinations, even if it depends on such an act of abstraction which makes it possible to recognize others as being of the same general type as oneself. It is something more than this because it also consists in an act of self-limitation (*Selbstbeschränkung*), whereby each person freely imposes limits on him- or herself by restricting the sphere of his or her activity with a view to granting others the possibility of exercising *their* capacity for free choice (GA I/3: 350-351; FNR, 41). Nevertheless, the act of abstraction mentioned above together with the capacity to perform such an act remain conditions of this act of self-limitation, in that this second act is directed at a being that one already recognizes as free and rational like oneself. The first act, the one in which one abstracts from all differences, is, then, a condition of the possibility of mutual recognition.

Fichte’s deduction of the concept of right can be seen to explain the essential features of Hegel’s notion of mutual recognition as a state of affairs in which ‘[e]ach sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be

useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both'.¹⁴ To begin with, each person performs an act of *self*-negation by limiting his or her own activity for the sake of another person's freedom. In limiting his or her activity in relation to others, each person respects the independence of others.¹⁵ The logical and the practical impossibility of overcoming the independence of the object that becomes evident in the case of desire is thus accommodated within an account of how self-consciousness nevertheless overcomes the opposition between itself and the object of consciousness. At the same time, each person limits his or her activity in relation to others only in so far as they limit their activity in relation to him or to her, so that this overcoming of the opposition between the subject and the object of consciousness is possible only if the recognition is mutual. Finally, the act of self-negation represented by the summons involves treating all differences as irrelevant. It is, in short, in virtue of what persons have in common, as opposed to that which makes them into the particular individuals they are, that mutual recognition is possible at all. Why, then, does Hegel introduce a struggle for recognition, whereas Fichte does not? I want now to argue that this major difference can be explained with reference to a problem generated by the essential role that mutual recognition plays in Fichte's deduction of the concept of right.

The struggle for recognition

As we have seen, it is only by summoning another person that each person demonstrates that he or she is a free and rational being to which a summons can be directed, and it is only by being the object of such a summons that consciousness of oneself as a free and rational being becomes possible. Clearly, the second requirement is more fundamental than the first one because the wish to demonstrate that one is a free and rational being presupposes that one is conscious of oneself as such a being, and this form of consciousness presupposes that one has at some point already been the recipient of a summons of the relevant kind. Fichte's idea of a community of free and rational beings that reciprocally recognize each other as beings of the same general type in this way generates the following puzzle: how did such a community of free and rational beings come about when the first member of this community could not have achieved a consciousness of him- or herself as free and rational because he or she would not have been able to gain a determinate representation of him- or herself as such a being by means of a summons of the relevant kind? In the absence of a convincing answer to this question, one is left asking why the first human beings – none of whom was in a position to issue such a summons to others – did not instead remain merely natural beings driven by desire and instinct in such a way as to render them incapable of freely limiting their activity

in relation to others. In short, Fichte's account of recognition presupposes certain capacities and powers whose existence has not been sufficiently explained in the case of the first human beings.

Fichte demonstrates that he himself is aware of this problem when he identifies the summons to engage in free activity addressed to others not with any single action but with a whole series of actions, which he associates with the notion of upbringing or education (*Erziehung*) (GA I/3: 347; FNR, 38). This shows that for him freedom and rationality are the result of a process. Yet the idea of a process simply reproduces the problem mentioned above, in that it invites the question as to the origin of the kind of community in which the right type of educational process - that is to say, one that aims to produce in others a consciousness of themselves as essentially free and rational beings - first became possible. In other words, the question arises as to how the first members of this community were themselves educated to think of themselves in the required way and were thereby able to educate others with the aim of developing in them the same capacities and the same self-conception. This leads Fichte to ask who brought up or educated the first human couple. He himself refers to the wisdom of the Genesis account of the care that God took of Adam and Eve, in which a rational being, though not a human one but a 'spirit', is described as having taken care of the first human couple (GA I/3: 347-348; FNR, 38). Fichte recognizes, then, that his account of recognition within the framework of a transcendental deduction of the conditions of self-consciousness ultimately needs to be supplemented by a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition. Hegel can be seen to replace Fichte's appeal to Biblical narrative with a genetic account which begins with a struggle for recognition, making mutual recognition into something that must first be achieved through an antagonistic social and historical process that performs an educational function.

At the beginning of the struggle for recognition portrayed in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, each self-consciousness confronts another self-consciousness as a purely natural being, and as something whose independence is of essentially the same kind as the independence of the object of desire, that is to say, a purely physical form of independence:

Appearing thus immediately on the scene, they are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes, individuals submerged in the being of *Life* ... They are, *for each other*, shapes of consciousness which have not yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction, of rooting-out all immediate being, and of being the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness.¹⁶

What, though, is the act or ‘movement’ of ‘absolute abstraction’ mentioned in this passage?

The reference to ‘rooting-out all immediate being’ suggests that this act corresponds to the act of abstraction that is a condition of recognizing others as beings of the same general type as oneself and that is in this respect also a condition of the act of freely limiting one’s activity in relation to them - an act that one performs in order to be recognized in turn by others as a free and rational being - at least in so far as it consists in abstracting from all natural features (e.g. physical and racial characteristics, given desires and their objects) that differentiate one human being from other human beings or have the potential to do so. The act of abstracting from all such features would leave us only with the identity of a self-consciousness or ‘I’ which unifies all such determinate features within itself (‘the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness’). In the first stage of the struggle for recognition, however, the object of consciousness is viewed as a being that has not performed this act of abstraction. In the case of one of the participants in this struggle, the object of consciousness shows itself instead to be ultimately incapable of performing such an act.

By risking their lives in the struggle for recognition, individuals attempt to demonstrate both to themselves and to others that they enjoy the independence which Fichte associates with the self-identity of self-consciousness, on the grounds that in positing itself the I does not depend on anything external to itself. Rather, it is entirely self-constituting and self-determining. In the case of the individual self-consciousness which engages in the struggle for recognition, this independence assumes the specific form of the ability to act independently of any given desire or any other natural feature that might determine its actions. Moreover, at this stage of human consciousness and development it is only by entering this struggle that individuals can, according to Hegel, demonstrate their independence in this sense both to themselves and to others:

it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*.¹⁷

This practical demonstration of one’s independence is thereby meant to provide a determinate representation of this same independence in the form of another person’s recognition of one’s

independence, making this independence into an object of consciousness which is not, however, other than the subject of consciousness. In this way, a unity of the moments of identity (self-consciousness) and non-identity (consciousness) is achieved. Each self-consciousness can here be understood to be motivated to enter the struggle for recognition by a practical need which generates ‘the drive to *show* itself as a free self, and to be *there* as a free self to the other’.¹⁸

The act of abstraction on which the achievement of such a determinate representation of oneself ultimately depends finds immediate expression in the willingness to risk one’s own life by entering into deadly conflict with another human being in an attempt to gain recognition of what one takes oneself essentially to be (i.e. an independent being). This willingness to risk one’s own life demonstrates that one is independent of all the particular natural features that together constitute life, including one’s own life, understood as a whole. Yet one of the participants in the struggle for recognition ultimately fails to perform this act of abstraction because the fear of death proves to be stronger in the end. This individual allows him- or herself thereby to be treated by the other participant as merely a thing and as nothing more than the means to the ends of another individual’s desires. This outcome generates a problem, however, in that the one who exercises domination cannot recognize him- or herself in the object of his or her consciousness, namely, in the human being whom he or she dominates. Rather, ‘the object in which the lord has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one’.¹⁹

Given this apparent dead end, there arises not only the question as to how genuine recognition of oneself as an independent being, and thus a representation of what one takes oneself essentially to be, can be achieved, but also the question as to whether the struggle for recognition can, after all, provide a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition in such a way as to solve the problem identified above in connection with Fichte’s deduction of the concept of right. In relation to the second issue in particular, Hegel introduces a type of reversal in which the one who is dominated turns out to achieve the capacity for self-determination, that is, not only the capacity for independence but also the capacity to constrain one’s own activity through an act of free choice. As we have seen, the latter is, in the form of the capacity to limit one’s own activity in relation to others, a condition of the act of self-negation expressed by means of a summons described by Fichte. This capacity is developed by means of the discipline required of an individual who must labour in accordance with the demands of a master, as opposed to doing something simply because he

or she happens to desire to do it. Hegel accordingly describes work as ‘desire held in check’.²⁰ In an addition to the corresponding paragraph of his *Encyclopaedia* he is recorded as even saying that the discipline imposed by relations of domination constitutes ‘the beginning of genuine human freedom’, because the human being who is dominated learns not to act according to his or her immediate desires; and if such self-discipline is a necessary condition of the development of the capacity for self-determination – and with it the possibility of an act of self-limitation - it follows that without ‘having experienced the discipline that breaks self-will, no one becomes free, rational, and capable of command’.²¹

From this type of claim it can be seen that the reversal in question is meant to demonstrate that although risking one’s life by engaging in the struggle for recognition satisfies a necessary condition of mutual recognition, namely, the consciousness of oneself as an independent being which is not immediately determined by its natural desires or drives, it cannot be a sufficient condition of such recognition. Indeed, the way in which it generates relations of domination already shows this. In any case, even this necessary condition is only partially satisfied, because the independence in question does not become an object of consciousness in the form of the recognition accorded to oneself by another human being in whom one’s own sense of independence is adequately mirrored. As we have just seen, another necessary condition is the development of the capacity to limit one’s drive for independence in relation to others, and this is something that cannot be achieved by someone who possesses absolute power in relation to others and is therefore free to treat and to use them in accordance with his or her immediately given desires or drives.

The possibility of alternative ways of becoming the type of being to which a summons can be addressed and that is capable of summoning others by limiting its own activity in relation to them may be thought to undermine the following claim that Hegel makes: ‘The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a *person*, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness’.²² We should not, however, lose sight of the specific problem inherited from Fichte with which Hegel is attempting to deal. In the light of this problem, the struggle for recognition can be thought to be necessary on account of the discipline to which it subjects individuals and thereby makes them capable of limiting their own activity in relation to others. Only then can there be alternative ways of becoming the type of being to which a summons can be addressed and that is capable of summoning others by limiting its own activity in relation to them. Moreover, the experience of having risked one’s own life is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of the formation of the type of consciousness with which Hegel associates the very

beginnings of human freedom. In the case of the bondsman, this experience is preserved even if the fear of death proved stronger in the end, for ‘this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations’.²³

Under different historical and social conditions, the educative process which human beings must undergo could take another form, such as that of socialization within a community in which relations of mutual recognition already generally obtain in the form of the legal recognition that both Fichte and Hegel associate with right. Indeed, in his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel maintains that the struggle for recognition and the relations of domination associated with it concern only the ‘immediate consciousness of freedom’ characteristic of a condition in which ‘the human being exists as a natural being and as a concept which has being only in itself’, whereas ‘the Idea of freedom is truly present only as *the state*’.²⁴ The reasoning behind this set of claims becomes clearer if one recalls what I have already said concerning what motivated Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition, namely, the need to provide a genetic account of relations of mutual recognition which explains how it was possible for human beings to establish such relations among themselves when the first human beings, who are assumed to be originally purely natural beings, must be thought to have lacked the relevant capacities and self-conception. Yet once the required capacities and self-conception have been sufficiently developed in at least some human beings, they can educate others in such a way that they develop the same capacities and self-conception, making the struggle for recognition unnecessary and, moreover, unjust, in that it violates legal, social and political norms and their institutional embodiments that have come to be generally recognized as valid.

In relation to the last point, it is significant that in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel claims that the individual who has not risked his life may nevertheless be recognized as a person and thereby appears to treat the term ‘person’ as signifying something that falls short of what is required of a truly independent self-consciousness. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the person forms the subject of the first moment of right, which Hegel calls ‘abstract right’. The concept of the person here broadly corresponds to the legal subject of Fichte’s doctrine or theory of right (*Rechtslehre*). For Fichte, the person exercises freedom of choice within a legally recognized sphere that must ultimately be guaranteed by the state (GA I/3: 361; FNR, 53). Given that the person exercises freedom of choice and recognizes the rights of others to

exercise it, personality by its very nature presupposes the capacity for self-determination and self-limitation. In this respect, it also presupposes that each and every person has been the object of a summons and, in so far as a genetic account of a community in which human beings can be the object of a summons is concerned, that the type of struggle for recognition described by Hegel is already over. Persons can conceive of themselves as independent of any purely natural, given features that distinguish them from others and can therefore adopt a reflective stance towards such features; indeed, it is the possibility of doing so that makes them independent of these features. Legal recognition requires in addition that persons exercise self-determination not only through the ends that they adopt and act upon but also by limiting their freedom in relation to others, thereby recognizing the right of others to act in accordance with their own ends.

For Hegel, personality begins with the subject's 'consciousness of itself as a completely abstract "I" in which all concrete limitation and validity are negated and invalidated', and when 'there is knowledge of the *self* as an *object*, but as an object raised by thought to simple infinity and hence purely identical with itself'.²⁵ Yet personality is also 'that which acts to overcome [*aufzuheben*] this limitation and to give itself reality – or, what amounts to the same thing, to posit that existence [*Dasein*] as its own'.²⁶ The limitation in question is that of being something merely subjective, and the existence that the person seeks to posit as its own is therefore one that can be taken to involve a change in, or appropriation of, parts of the external, material world confronting it. Thus the person is not only abstractly free but also seeks to realize its freedom in the world through the exercise of free choice, the initial objects of which are external things that it makes into its property.

If personality is an achievement - as both Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition and the role of the summons in Fichte's deduction of the concept of right imply it is - the question arises as to how ages in which relations of mutual recognition were either completely or in large part absent are to be judged from the standpoint of an age in which such relations obtain or in which the general need for them has at least been acknowledged. Since slavery represents a clear example of the absence of recognition,²⁷ I shall now turn to some things that Fichte and Hegel have to say about it so as to determine how they must be thought to answer this question. Although their commitment to the idea of the necessity of mutual recognition, either as a condition of self-consciousness or as a condition of overcoming the alienation that accompanies the unresolved opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, suggests that they must condemn slavery unconditionally, we shall see that the matter is, in fact, less clear-cut than this.

Fichte and Hegel on slavery

In his account of abstract right, Hegel draws a distinction between persons and things. A thing lacks personality and cannot, therefore, be a bearer of rights.²⁸ This is because a thing *by its very nature* lacks the capacities (freedom and rationality) that Hegel associates with personality. Slavery, by reducing a person to the status of a thing which is the property of a person who has the right to dispose of it as he or she pleases, is inherently unjust because it treats persons as things. Hegel describes the slave as someone whose ‘entire scope of ... activity had been alienated to his master’.²⁹ In other words, the slave is in no position at all to exercise self-determination through the free use of his or her powers, unlike the person who has alienated these powers through an act of free choice and only for a limited period of time by means of a contract. Thus slavery represents a radical example of the alienation of personality.³⁰

Hegel rejects all justifications of slavery based on contingent factors or events (e.g. surrendering in battle, being the child of a slave). Rather, he seeks to comprehend the institution of slavery in terms of what a human being essentially is. Slavery depends on conceiving a human being ‘simply as a *natural being* whose *existence* ... is not in conformity with his concept’.³¹ I take Hegel to mean ‘natural’ in the sense of being motivated by considerations such as the fear of death or in the sense of being born with a certain character or particular social status (e.g. being by nature fearful or cowardly, being born the son or daughter of someone who is already a slave). The claim that slavery is wrong, by contrast, is based on ‘the *concept* of the human being as spirit, as something free *in itself*’.³² Given his accounts of recognition and personality, one may well expect the last claim to represent Hegel’s own viewpoint. He criticizes this viewpoint, however, on the grounds that it regards the human being ‘as *by nature* free, or (and this amounts to the same thing) takes the concept as such in its immediacy’.³³ This criticism can be related to a feature of his account of the struggle for recognition, namely, that freedom (and therefore personality) is an achievement (at both an individual and collective level), as opposed to something merely given. This brings me to a further point.

Hegel associates general recognition of personality specifically with a certain historical epoch. This epoch marks the transition from the ancient to the modern world and it begins with the rise of Christianity: ‘It must be nearly one and a half millennia since the *freedom of personality* began to flourish under Christianity and became a universal principle for part – if only a small part – of the human race’.³⁴ Hegel could be interpreted as saying

both of the following two things: (1) that in other ages, cultures or societies consciousness of personality was (or is) lacking and (2) that slavery in such ages, cultures or societies cannot therefore be condemned in absolute moral terms. Clearly, (2) is not entailed by (1), since a description of the absence of something in another age, culture and society does not exclude moral condemnation of this age, culture and society on account of its failure to recognize the rights or value of something. Hegel's acceptance of (2) is nevertheless suggested by his claim that criticism of slavery becomes possible only at the higher stage of consciousness and development presupposed by his own *Philosophy of Right*, for only then can the limitations of this institution be properly comprehended. This claim can be detected in the following statement: 'Slavery occurs in the transitional phase between natural human existence and the truly ethical condition; it occurs in a world where a wrong is still right. Here, the wrong *is valid*, so that the position it occupies is a necessary one'.³⁵

This viewpoint is compatible with the idea of the necessity of the struggle for recognition at a certain point in social history. Yet it also raises a problem: if individuals lacked personality at a certain point in time, how could they have ever come to alienate their personality by becoming slaves, given that any act of alienation presupposes the freedom to dispose of what is one's own, and in this way presupposes in turn that one already has a consciousness of oneself as a person? In other words, the essential connection that Hegel, following Fichte, makes between personality and the exercise of free choice implies that alienating one's personality must itself be an act that is freely performed, for otherwise it would simply not be a case of the alienation of personality itself. If we view this problem in relation to Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition and its immediate outcome, however, one can view personality itself as a by-product of this struggle together with the domination and discipline suffered by human beings as a result of preferring life to independence. As the consciousness of personality develops and spreads, the institution of slavery must gradually come to appear more and more unjust and the incentive to abolish it will become correspondingly greater and more widespread.

Although Hegel appears to identify the wish to demonstrate their independence of anything naturally given as that which immediately motivates the struggle for recognition, we have seen that this way of demonstrating one's independence is not the only way of securing recognition, even if it was so at a certain point in social history. Another way of gaining recognition is by means of legal relations which apply to all and are guaranteed by a state which recognizes all its citizens as equals. Thus, the notion of being a 'person' is regarded with contempt at the stage of the consciousness of freedom represented by the struggle for

recognition only because freedom is here identified with independence alone and not with the legally guaranteed status of personhood that, once achieved, means that the willingness to risk one's own life in a life-or-death struggle for recognition is no longer a condition of recognition. The problem remains, nevertheless, that if a human being who engaged in the struggle for recognition but preferred life to independence must be thought to lack the consciousness of personality as well as legal recognition, it is not clear how this individual can be held responsible for his or her slavery, in the sense that he or she has freely alienated his or her personality. Yet when Hegel claims that 'if someone is a slave, his own will is responsible',³⁶ he must be taken to mean that this human being had a consciousness of his independence and personality in the sense of an awareness of him- or herself as a being that is not immediately determined by natural desires and drives, but failed to demonstrate the reality of this self-conception through his or her actions, including the act of asserting his or her independence by risking his or her own life. This is itself a harsh conclusion, however, when applied to ages in which the struggle to preserve or first gain one's independence would not have been facilitated by existing forms of legal recognition, and when individuals would have had a hard time developing the relevant self-conception in the absence of this form of recognition and on account of the condition of servitude in which they found themselves.

Some of Fichte's remarks on slavery also point in the direction of the claim that the slave is personally responsible for his or her servitude without, however, its being possible to make clear sense of such a claim. In his *System of Ethics*, Fichte claims that cowardice, understood as the '*laziness* that prevents us from asserting *our freedom* and *self-sufficiency* [*Selbstständigkeit*] in our interaction [*Wechselwirkung*] with others', provides 'the only explanation for slavery among human beings, both physical and moral' (GA I/5: 185; SE, 192). Physical slavery, which is closest to the historical forms of slavery that concern us here, is said to have its source in a willingness to yield to the greater force of others simply because resistance would require too much effort and pain.

The fact that Fichte regards the failure to resist superior physical force as morally reprehensible even when resistance is likely to result in one's own death is shown by how he compares the person who commits suicide unfavourably with the virtuous person who endures the evils he or she suffers, but nevertheless regards the former person as a hero 'in comparison with the abject person who subjects himself to shame and slavery simply in order to prolong for a few more years the miserable feeling of his own existence' (GA I/5: 240; SE, 257). Fichte appears to assume, then, that slaves are morally responsible for the domination to which they are subject because it was, and remains, possible for them to resist it and

thereby to assert their independence, whereas they did not (or do not) choose to do so through cowardice and the fear of death. This argument is problematic in at least two respects, beyond the fact that it places what are arguably unduly rigorous demands on human beings, demands to which some human beings have found themselves subject in virtue of such factors as race and their inability to defend themselves in the face of overwhelming physical force, whereas others have simply had the good fortune never to be subject to the same demands.

The first problem is that the laziness in terms of which Fichte explains the cowardice which allegedly accounts for the possibility of slavery forms part of his account of the condition of radical evil in which the natural human being finds him- or herself. Given that the natural condition is one in which human beings lack a clear consciousness of their freedom, it is difficult to explain, as Fichte himself recognizes, how they could ever escape this condition, when doing so would itself require an act of freedom on the part of beings that are held to be unaware of their capacity for freedom.³⁷ This in turn invites the question as to how a human being who had never left the natural condition, or had somehow returned to it, could be held morally responsible for the laziness which prevents him or her from resisting others in an attempt to avoid physical or moral slavery.

The second problem more directly concerns Fichte's account of recognition. As we have seen, the consciousness of oneself as free ultimately depends on being the object of a summons, which can take the form of an educative process or the form of legal recognition. Thus, if someone has not been subject to the right kind of educative process or is not accorded legal recognition, he or she would not, it seems, be in the position to become conscious of his or her freedom in the sense of the capacity to exercise self-determination, even if the desire for natural freedom in the sense of the absence of external constraints might nevertheless explain why a slave would be motivated to seek to escape the servitude to which he or she is subject. A slave could not, therefore, be held to be morally responsible for his or her failure as a person, as opposed to a purely natural being, to resist others in an attempt to avoid physical or moral slavery.

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, 'Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie', in *Jenaer kritische Schriften*, ed. Hartmut Buchner and Otto Pöggeler, *Hegel. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 4 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1968)(hereafter JS), 34. English translation: *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977) (hereafter D), 119. Other relevant texts from the same period are 'Glauben und Wissen oder die Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität, in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen, als Kantische, Jacobische, und Fichtesche Philosophie', in JS, 313-414. English translation: *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press,

1977), 153-187 and ‘Ueber die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie, und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Rechtswissenschaften’, in JS, 415-485. English translation: ‘On the Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, on its Place in Practical Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Right (1802-1803)’, in *Political Writings*, ed. Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132-139.

² JS, 12-16/D, 89-94.

³ JS, 37/D, 123; translation modified.

⁴ On the importance of Fichte’s concept of recognition for Hegel’s account of recognition, see Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), Ludwig Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1979), Allen W. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Chapter 4, and Allen W. Wood, ‘Fichtean Themes in Hegel’s Dialectic of Recognition’, in Allen W. Wood, *The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right, and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede, *Hegel. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1980) (hereafter PhG), 103. English translation: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) (hereafter PS), 104.

⁶ PhG, 103/PS, 104.

⁷ Cf. PhG, 104/PS, 105.

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften III 1830; Dritter Teil: Die Philosophie des Geistes*, in *Werke*, ed. E. Moldauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), Vol. 10, (hereafter EG), § 325. Cited according to paragraph (§) numbers. A indicates a remark (*Anmerkung*) which Hegel himself added to the paragraph, while Z (*Zusatz*) indicates an addition deriving from student lecture notes. English translation: *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹ PhG, 107/PS, 109.

¹⁰ See, for example, JS, 45-47/D, 132-35.

¹¹ PhG, 108/PG, 109.

¹² PhG 108/PG 110.

¹³ PhG 108/PS 110.

¹⁴ PhG 110/PS, 112.

¹⁵ This does not mean that the relation thus established is a moral one, in the sense that one party recognizes that the other party has an absolute value which imposes moral limitations that apply irrespective of whatever one happens to desire. Rather, at the level of right recognition is ultimately motivated by what are, for Fichte, non-moral considerations, whose ultimate source is self-interest, as opposed to its being motivated by a direct concern for the freedom of others. Cf. David James, ‘Fichte on Personal Freedom and the Freedom of Others’, in Gabriel Gottlieb (ed.), *Fichte’s Foundations of Natural Right: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁶ PhG, 111/PS, 113.

¹⁷ PhG, 111/PS, 114.

¹⁸ EG § 430; translation modified.

¹⁹ PhG, 114/PG, 116-117.

²⁰ PhG, 115/PG, 118.

²¹ EG § 435Z.

²² PhG, 111/PS, 114.

²³ PhG, 114/PS, 117.

²⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse*, in *Werke*, ed. E. Moldauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), Vol. 7 (hereafter PR), § 57A. Cited according to paragraph (§) numbers. A indicates a remark (*Anmerkung*) which Hegel himself added to the paragraph, while Z (*Zusatz*) indicates an addition deriving from student lecture notes). English translation: *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. A. W. Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also EG § 432Z.

²⁵ PR § 35A.

²⁶ PR § 39.

²⁷ In Hegel's case the fact that relations of domination are the immediate outcome of the struggle for recognition makes it especially tempting to see him as in some way alluding to accounts of slavery, as when this outcome is said to combine two forms of slavery mentioned by Aristotle: slavery through battle and slavery by nature. Cf. Ludwig Siep, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Daniel Smyth (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 93. In the first case the battle in question can be identified with the struggle for recognition, and in the second case the outcome of this struggle reduces one party to it to an enemy who offers his services in exchange for his life and thereby shows that he is by nature incapable of independence.

²⁸ Cf. PR § 42.

²⁹ PR § 67Z.

³⁰ Cf. PR § 66A.

³¹ PR § 57A.

³² PR § 57A.

³³ PR § 57A.

³⁴ PR § 62A.

³⁵ PR § 57Z.

³⁶ PR § 57Z.

³⁷ For more on this particular problem, see David James, *Fichte's Republic: Idealism, History and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 52-53.