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What Hegel Missed About Recognition

Robert Pippin wrote that Hegel's theory of recognition is intended as an answer to the specific question of the nature and possibility of freedom,[1] and Pippin writes that Hegel holds that recognition from the social institutions of family, civil society, and the state are conditions for the possibility of an individual being a free subject – the relations of individuals to social institutions are forms of dependence that are criteria for freedom. I believe that this interpretation of Hegel's position is fundamentally correct and that also correct is Pippin's accentuation that social institutions are ethical and not primarily natural institutions. I wish to push this accentuation further to address what I see as a significant shortcoming in Hegel's theory of recognition – Hegel's overinstitutionalization of recognition relations.

Hegel's system grasps that we need recognition because we can gain self-consciousness as autonomous beings only by interacting with and receiving recognition from others. Despite the influence of Hegel's portrayal of recognition, a significant lacuna in Hegel's portrayal is insufficiently discussed. Recognition is more complex than Hegel portrays it, especially given that social diversity is greater now than in Hegel's time. Hegel assumes that recognition relations are binary and places those recognition relations under the auspices, if not domination, of institutionalized orders. Thus, Hegel's systematic conception of recognition binds the journey of self-consciousness to social spheres and institutions, leaving outside of this system a vast area of social phenomena in which individuals seek recognition in various ways under various conditions. To enhance recognition as a useful concept for contemporary philosophy and the social sciences, we need to fill in what Hegel missed about recognition.

The nature of the problem in Hegel's theory of recognition can be described by the problem of dependence. It is true as Pippin observes that an individual needs to come to a realization of dependence on others without whom the individual cannot be who he or she is.[2] The reality of dependency is inescapable. One can receive recognition only from others. Even if one were to feel affirmed in oneself from self-recognition, one can derive little to no social capital from that; one still

[1] R. Pippin, "What Is the Question for Which Hegel's Theory of Recognition Is the Answer?", in: *European Journal of Philosophy* 8:22 (2002), 155–172.

[2] Pippin, "Question", 166.