

Violence and Negativity in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

TARIK KOCHI*

“In the beginning was the deed”.¹

Introduction

This paper offers a reading of the opening chapters of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).² Hegel, inheriting the notion of the spontaneity of thinking from Immanuel Kant, and the notion of the self's positing of itself from Johann Gottlieb Fichte, develops a radical and original account of the metaphysics of subjectivity. Central to Hegel's account, yet often overlooked, is an approach which begins to think seriously about the relation between thinking and action, and in particular, the relationship between negativity and negation within thinking and violence within the world. Hegel's account remains relevant to contemporary attempts to develop a philosophy of the subject and a philosophy of ethics. Each of these attempts would do well to consider the role and consequences of negativity and violence within subjectivity.

* Lecturer, School of Law, Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland. Email: T.Kochi@qub.ac.uk. Thanks to the Altonaer Stiftung für philosophische Grundlagenforschung (ASFPG) for its financial support and hospitality. Thanks also to Valerie Kerruish for her comments and to both Valerie and Uwe Petersen for the many conversations in Altona, Hamburg, which have contributed to this paper.

¹ Goethe, J.W. *Faust*, (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 67. Goethe's original German reads: "... *im Anfang war die That!*"

² Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Miller, A.V. tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

I

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1788) Kant argues that cognition arises from two sources in the mind, the first involves the reception of representations (intuition), the second involves an active faculty of cognising an object by means of these representations. Kant argues that the latter notion involves a certain ‘spontaneity’ of cognition and refers to it in a general sense as the faculty of the understanding (*Verstand*).³ This spontaneous activity of thinking is crucial for Kant. It occurs as a fundamental act of self-emanation without which the cognition of sensible representations would not be possible. Kant writes:

The *I think* must be able to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me that could not be thought at all, which is as much as to say that the representation would either be impossible or else at least would be nothing for me. That representation that can be given prior to all thinking is called *intuition*. Thus the manifold of all intuition has a necessary relation to the *I think* in the same subject in which this manifold is to be encountered. But this representation is an act [*Actus*] of *spontaneity*, i.e. it cannot be regarded as belonging to sensibility. I call it the *pure apperception*, in order to distinguish it from the *empirical* one, or also the *original apperception*, since it is that self-consciousness which, because it produces the representation *I think*, which must be able to accompany all others and which in all consciousness is one and the same, cannot be accompanied by any further representation. I also call its unity the *transcendental* unity of self-consciousness in order to designate the possibility of *a priori* cognition from it. For the manifold representations that are given in a certain intuition would not altogether be *my* representations if they did not altogether belong to a self-consciousness; i.e., as my representations (even if I am not conscious of them as such) they must yet necessarily be in accord with the condition under which alone they *can* stand together in a universal self-consciousness, because otherwise they

³ Kant, I. *Critique of Pure Reason*, Guyer, P. & Wood, A. eds. tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 193, A51/B75.

would not throughout belong to me. From this original combination much may be inferred.⁴

For Kant the ‘I think’ expresses the act of the thinking self’s determination of its existence. It is through the *spontaneous act of thinking* that there is such a thing as intelligence.⁵ This activity underlying human intelligence bears degrees of similarity with an intellectual activity that is claimed by Kant as the basis of transcendental freedom within his resolution of the ‘third antinomy of pure reason’.⁶ While each activity should not be reduced to the other, for Kant, there seems to be something significant that is shared between these two activities — a spontaneous activity of the ‘I’ residing at the basis of both human intelligence and human freedom.

An account of the spontaneity of thinking as an *act* or *deed* is inherited and given a radical emphasis by Fichte and his broad notion of

⁴ Ibid, pp. 246–247, B132–B133.

⁵ Ibid, p. 260, B158, in footnote.

⁶ Ibid, p. 533, A533/B561. Kant argues:

By freedom in the cosmological sense, on the contrary, I understand the faculty of beginning a state *from itself*, the causality of which does not in turn stand under another cause determining it in time in accordance with the law of nature. Freedom in this signification is a pure transcendental idea, which, first, contains nothing borrowed from experience, and second, the object of which also cannot be given determinately in any experience, because it is a universal law — even of the possibility of all experience — that everything that happens must have a cause, and hence that the causality of the cause, as *itself having happened* or arisen, must in turn have a cause; through this law, then, the entire field of experience, however far it may reach, is transformed into the sum total of mere nature. But since in such a way no absolute totality of conditions in causal relations is forthcoming, reason creates the idea of spontaneity, which could start to act from itself, without needing to be preceded by any other cause that in turn determines it to action according to the law of causal connection.

It is especially noteworthy that it is this *transcendental* idea of *freedom* on which the practical concept of freedom is grounded, and the former constitutes the real moment of the difficulties in the latter, which have long surrounded the question of its possibility. *Freedom in the practical sense* is the independence of the power of choice from *necessitation* by impulses of sensibility. For a power of choice is *sensible* insofar as it is *pathologically affected* (through moving-causes of sensibility); it is called *animal* power of choice (*arbitrium brutum*) if it can be *pathologically necessitated*. The human power of choice is indeed an *arbitrium sensitivum*, yet not *brutum* but *liberum*, because sensibility does not render its action necessary, but in the human being there is a faculty of determining oneself from oneself, independently of necessitation by sensible impulses.

thinking as ‘*Tathandlung*’. In the *Science of Knowledge* (1794)⁷ Fichte develops an account of the thinking self that is not originally reliant upon a sensible or empirical world but which creates itself or emanates from itself as an act of *self-positing*. For Fichte, while the activity of thinking or the intellect is spontaneous, it is not chaotic or lawless. Fichte argues that the intellect acts, but owing to its nature it can only act in a certain fashion. In this sense, for Fichte, there is a certain “law of action” of the intellect and there are “necessary laws of the intellect”.⁸

Taking the place of, or re-interpreting, Kant’s notion of the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, Fichte introduces a conception of the activity of the thinking intellect as the act of *positing* (*setzen*). Such a move is seen as necessary so that the categories of the understanding (within the framework of Kant’s architectonic) can actually be derived. For Fichte the intellect or the self is not posited by something else but is posited by itself, it is an act of *self-positing*. He writes:

The self’s own positing of itself is thus its own pure activity. The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it *exists*; and conversely, the self *exists* and *posits* its own existence by the virtue of merely existing. It is at once the agent and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action and deed are one and the same, and hence the ‘I am’ expresses an Act, and the only one possible, as will inevitably appear from the Science of Knowledge as a whole.⁹

For Fichte this conception of thinking being an act which posits itself cannot be proved empirically.¹⁰ Rather, it arises as a form of intellectual intuition (*intellektuelle Anschauung*) which Fichte compares to the form

⁷ Fichte, J.G. *The Science of Knowledge*, Heath, P. and Lachs, J. ed. tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁸ Ibid, p. 21.

⁹ Fichte, J.G. *Science of Knowledge*, p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid, Fichte, at p. 93 argues:

Our task is to *discover* the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge. This can be neither *proved* nor *defined*, if it is to be an absolutely primary principle.

It is intended to express that *Act* which does not and cannot appear among the empirical states of our consciousness, but rather lies at the basis of all consciousness and alone makes it possible.

of sensible intuition (*sinnliche Anschauung*) of space and time presupposed by Kant.¹¹ On this notion of intellectual intuition Fichte argues:

This intuiting of himself that is required of the philosopher, in performing the act whereby the self arises for him, I refer to as *intellectual intuition*. It is the immediate consciousness that I act, and what I enact: it is that whereby I know something because I do it. We cannot prove from concepts that this power of intellectual intuition exists, nor evolve from them what it may be. Everyone must discover it immediately in himself, or he will never make its acquaintance. The demand to have it proved for one by reasoning is vastly more extraordinary than would be the demand of a person born blind to have it explained to him what colours are, without his needing to see.

Everyone, to be sure, can be shown, in his own admitted experience, that this intellectual intuition occurs at every moment of his consciousness. I cannot take a step, move a hand or foot, without an intellectual intuition of my self-consciousness in these acts; only so do I know that *I* do it, only so do I distinguish my action, and myself therein, from the object of action before me. Whosoever ascribes an activity to himself, appeals to this intuition. The source of life is contained therein, and without it there is death.¹²

Fichte attempts to outline the basic operation of the self-positing of the self (*das Ich*). He begins with the basic proposition 'A is A' or 'A = A' and its suggestion that 'if A exists, then A exists'.¹³ For Fichte, the necessary connection between 'if' and 'then' (named 'X') expresses a form of positing, in the sense that 'A' is posited, therefore 'A' is.¹⁴ Fichte extends this conception to include a universal notion of self abstracted from empirical content, expressed as 'I = I' or 'I am I'.¹⁵ Thus:

But the proposition 'I am I' has a meaning wholly different from that of 'A is A'. For the latter has content only under a certain condition. *If* A is posited, it is naturally posited *as* A, as having

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 49–51.

¹² Ibid, p. 38.

¹³ Ibid, p. 94.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 95.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 96.

the predicate A. But this proposition still tells us nothing as to *whether* it actually is posited, and hence whether it is posited with any particular predicate. Yet the proposition ‘I am I’ is unconditionally and absolutely valid, since it is equivalent to the proposition X; it is valid not merely in form but also in content. In it the I is posited, not conditionally, but absolutely, with the predicate of equivalence to itself; hence it really *is* posited, and the proposition can be expressed as *I am*.¹⁶

This ‘I’ for Fichte, as the spontaneous act of the intellect, is grounded upon its own activity, it is “absolutely posited”.¹⁷ For Fichte the ‘I’ refers to the “absolute subject”: “That whose being or essence consists simply in the fact that it posits itself as existing”.¹⁸ Following the notion of the positing of identity Fichte introduces the notion of the positing of opposition, through the proposition ‘ $\sim A$ is not equal to A’ ($\sim A \neq A$; which involves: $\sim A = \sim A$).¹⁹ Fichte argues that if any $\sim A$ were posited this would presuppose an A, and in this sense the $\sim A$ would need to be understood as materially conditioned. For Fichte, in the positing of an $\sim A$, an A must also be posited.²⁰ Fichte writes:

As surely as the absolute certainty of the proposition ‘ $\sim A$ is not equal to A’ is unconditionally admitted among the facts of em-

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 98. Fichte at p. 99 states: “The self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence”. At pp. 100–1 Fichte argues further:

That our proposition is the absolutely basic principle of all knowledge, was pointed out by *Kant*, in his deduction of the categories; but he never laid it down specifically *as* the basic principle. *Descartes*, before him, put forward a similar proposition: *cogito, ergo sum* — which need not have been merely the minor premise and conclusion of a syllogism, with the major premise: *quodcumque cogitat est*; for he may very well have regarded it as an immediate datum of consciousness. It would then amount to *cogitans sum, ergo sum* (or as we should say, *sum, ergo sum*). But in that case the addition of *cogitans* is entirely superfluous; we do not necessarily think when we exist, but we necessarily exist whenever we think. Thinking is by no means the essence, but merely a specific determination of existence; and our existence has many other determinations besides this.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 103.

²⁰ Ibid.

pirical consciousness, *so surely is a not-self opposed absolutely to the self.*²¹

From this basis Fichte puts forward the notion that the positing of every A involves the implicit positing of the $\sim A$ and vice versa. Fichte extends this to the notion that the positing of the self (I) involves the implicit positing of the not-self ($\sim I$) and that the self is posited through the simultaneous positing of both itself and what is other than itself, the not-self. For Fichte when the self posits itself through its opposite it is positing its limit.²² He argues that: "To *limit* something is to abolish its reality, not *wholly* but in *part* only, by negation".²³ Such limitation through negation points to the notion of divisibility and the notion that the self and not-self are posited as divisible.²⁴ Fichte argues that: "In the self I oppose a divisible not self to the divisible self".²⁵

The notion of the spontaneous activity of thinking which posits both itself and its not-self or 'other' is inherited by Hegel.²⁶ Further, the central idea of thinking as a deed is taken up by Hegel and given a radical re-interpretation, especially in relation to the operation of negation. For Kant and Fichte the deed of thinking, its self-positing and negation of its self and its other, took place purely in the realm of thinking. In the *Science of Logic* (1812–16)²⁷ Hegel is similarly concerned with the realm

²¹ Ibid, p. 104.

²² Ibid, p. 108. Fichte states:

Hence, as before, we must make an experiment and ask: How can A and $\sim A$, being and nonbeing, reality and negation, be thought together without mutual elimination and destruction? ... We need not expect anyone to answer the question other than as follows: They will mutually *limit* one another.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 110.

²⁶ Significant in the movement between Fichte and Hegel is the philosophy of Schelling. See: Schelling, F.W.J. *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Heath, P. tr. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001). For more general accounts of the philosophical movements between Kant and Hegel see: Henrich, D. *Between Kant and Hegel*, Pacini, D.S. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Di Giovanni, G. *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000); Kolakowski, L. *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. 1. Falla, P.S. tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

²⁷ In the first half of the *Logic* Hegel attempts to derive the categories of the understanding. He shows how contradiction is contained at the heart, not just at the peripheries of pure reason. See: Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, Miller, A.V. tr.

of pure reason and demonstrates, contra Kant, that contradictions are not confined to merely the four ‘cosmological antinomies of pure reason’ but are contained within every act of thinking. For Hegel pure reason, as with all human thinking, is *antinomical*, it is characterised by *contradiction* and hence, transcendental philosophy needs to comprehend the role, operation and activity of contradiction within pure reason.²⁸ While Hegel in his *Logic* is concerned with the realm of pure reason, the relation between his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Logic* is such as to make his undertaking consistent with the activity of actual thinking within the living, social world in the realm of *spirit* (*Geist*). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel shows how the deeds of thinking (drawn into view by Kant and Fichte) occur also as physical, social deeds within an inter-subjective and inter-institutional human world. By making such a move Hegel forges an original and crucial link between the tradition of transcendental philosophy, negativity and the operation of human violence. The link has consequences for any account of morality or ethics that presupposes or develops historically from Kant’s notion of transcendental freedom.

II

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel inherits the necessary relationship occurring in the positing of the self between self and not-self, or between self and other, developed by Fichte. Hegel takes this relationship, which for Fichte is implicit in both the notion and existence of the ‘I’, and places it back within a living world of not only sense experience and perception but, also a world containing physical materiality and living, breathing other beings. A notion of ‘world’ is not added to Fichte’s account of the

(London: Allen and Unwin, 1969); Hegel, G.W.F. *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, Geraets, T.F., Suchting, W.A. and Harris, H.S. tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

²⁸ Hegel, G.W.F., *Encyclopaedia Logic*, §48, states:

The main point that has to be made is that antinomy is found not only in the four particular objects taken from cosmology, but rather in *all* objects of all kinds, in *all* representations, concepts, and ideas. To know this, and to be cognizant of this property of objects, belongs to what is essential in philosophical study; this is the property that constitutes what will determine itself in due course as the *dialectical* moment of logical thinking.

self, it is already implicit in the notion of the not-self, which must include everything *other* than the self. Hegel simply makes this more explicit and asks the question: how does the self come to be itself as distinct from its not-self? Hegel's account asks further: how does the self precisely come to draw the limits of itself from its other and thus *become conscious of itself* in a way that it might be *certain* that what it *intuits* as itself (the 'I') is actually itself and not, in fact, something other?

For Hegel if we might have an immediate sense or intellectual intuition of a particular 'I' that simply *is*, or that exists, then there arises something of a philosophical problem of how this specific, immediate 'I' can be distinguished from something else. He claims that if we try to identify the immediate 'I' that we *mean*, then it is taken as something different from something else, it is a 'this' rather than a 'that'.²⁹ Hegel argues that there is a difference between the 'this' or the object that we might *mean* and the 'this' or the object that is expressed through words. Hegel argues:

It is as a universal too that we *utter* what the sensuous [content] is. What we say is: 'This', i.e. the *universal* This; or 'it is', i.e. *Being in general*. Of course, we do not *envisage* the universal This or Being in general, but we *utter* the universal; in other words, we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*.³⁰

In one sense Hegel can be understood as arguing against a tradition that tries to ground transcendental philosophy upon a notion of *intellectual intuition* and demands that if an account of self-consciousness is to be a subject of philosophy (rather than a subject of aesthetics) then it needs to be explained through a philosophical language. In another sense, by suggesting the 'truthfulness' of language Hegel draws out a speculative theme latent in Fichte but not fully brought to bear in philosophy. The theme involves the notion of *mediation* in general which is most apparent in the use of symbols and words within language which have meaning as points

²⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 58.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 60.

of designation and universality only in some form of relation to their others. The relation between self and not-self occurs as one basic speculative form, each term has meaning only in its relation of distinction from the other, and further, when one is *meant*, a sense of the distinction from the other, a reference to this other, and thus, some aspect or representation of the other, is contained within this meaning. For Hegel, comprehending an object concretely, rather than abstractly, involves grasping how its content, or the object itself, is mediated through such a relation.

From Hegel's viewpoint Kant and Fichte have only presented an abstract account of the 'I' or self-consciousness. They have not yet grasped a concrete account of self-consciousness which would come about through paying attention to how self-consciousness is mediated. Part of the structure of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* presents a speculative account of self-consciousness by moving from the abstract to the more concrete. Hegel can be seen to do this by drawing attention to the operation of mediation (*Vermittlung*), negation and the manner in which the knowledge of an object gains a greater speculative or determinate content when viewed in terms of its necessary inter-relations with its others. In relation to the Fichtean account of the self, this involves comprehending its self-positing in relation to its not-self, this being a world of physical objects and other intelligent human subjects.

For Hegel, the Fichtean self-consciousness exists in a world where it has some immediate sense of itself, the 'I', and where it is confronted by something that is not itself, a world of appearance. In its existence self-consciousness posits both itself and its not-self, however, it is not completely certain of the boundaries or limits of itself. That is, it cannot be certain of the limits of the self, as determined by the not-self, because this boundary is marked (for Kant and Fichte) by the uncertain and often erroneous world of appearance. Hegel argues that the self wants to become fully conscious of what it is, that is, it wants to become self-conscious and wants to know itself with certainty rather than vagueness.³¹ Hegel calls this demand, need or drive that the self know itself and know itself as an identity or unity that is distinct from its not-self, 'desire' (*Begierde*) in general.³²

³¹ Ibid, p. 105.

³² Ibid.

By placing the abstract 'I' in the world Hegel positions the self within a broader category of 'life'.³³ Positioned within a world of life and driven by a desire to know itself with certainty, the self, in the manner of Kant, cannot withdraw from a world of appearance and turn back into itself. If the self withdrew from the world of appearance into itself it would never be able to know with any certainty the limits or boundaries of itself — the self would not *know* where *it* ends and where the shadowy world of appearance begins. Rather, for Hegel, the only means by which a self might come to know what *it is*, is through the experience of learning the limits of itself through becoming aware of the independence of its objects, that is, the independence of what *is* the not-self.³⁴ For Hegel it is through the outward mediated *experience* of the world and not through some form of purely *internal* knowing or intellectual intuition that a consciousness becomes a self-consciousness. This is not to say that Hegel rejects entirely any immediate knowledge of self. Rather, he draws attention the fact that any form of immediate knowledge is *always* mediated through the self's experience of its implicit relation with the external world.³⁵

One aspect of the speculative account Hegel presents involves the sense that through the self's experience of the not-self there occurs a radical change in both the self's knowledge of itself and the self's knowledge of the world. By experiencing a certain independence of an object in the world, for example, in the way that it needs to be moved, or that it can be eaten or chopped down, the self comes to a firmer, more detailed, and more concrete knowledge of its objects. Further, through this greater knowledge of the objects of the not-self, the self comes to a firmer, more concrete and more detailed knowledge of itself: a knowledge of what it *is* through reflecting upon the character, qualities and forms contained within the relations and mediations between itself and what is other than itself. What was initially a very abstract concept of the self's being, the simple assertion 'I am' has now taken on a more concrete content. What being is for the 'I' is radically different after the process of experiencing and its own reflection upon this process. By drawing attention to how the self's knowledge of itself is *constituted* through its experience of

³³ Ibid, p. 106.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ On the relation between immediacy and mediation in Hegel's philosophy see the discussion in: Henrich, D. *Hegel im Kontext*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971).

mediation with the not-self and its reflection upon this experience, Hegel draws attention to the *speculative nature* of knowing and the production of knowledge. In this both the knowing *subject* and the known *object* are constituted through each other. For Hegel, grasping the *subject-object* character of all knowledge is central to the task of any critical, or now, speculative philosophy.

For Fichte, the self's relation to its not-self involved the operation of negation. The self distinguished or determined itself and maintained its self-identity through the negation of what was other than it. In Fichte this self-inscription of the unity of the 'I' through negation took place purely at the level of thinking. Negation was an act of thinking and as taking place within the realm of thinking, when the not-self was 'negated', no physical harm was done. For Hegel, if we are to consider what self-consciousness in fact *is* then the self needs to be understood as positioned firmly within the physical and social world, within *life*, where the self's demand for unity and certainty of self-identity operates as desire. Placed within the realm of life the self's negation of the object occurs no longer purely as an act of thinking. Rather, this act of thinking occurs also as a physical act whereby the negation of the object by the self involves harm, destruction, killing, and violence. For the self which has not yet understood the speculative connection between itself and the other this negation is easy, it sees the object merely as the negative of itself (without a positive content of its own) and treats it accordingly. Hegel argues:

Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*.³⁶

For Hegel the desire for a self to fully become certain of itself, to become conscious of itself, does not gain satisfaction in the self's relation to the bare world of objects. Part of this rests in the fact that these

³⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 109. A certain sense of this violence is picked up by Derrida in the essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'. Derrida's interpretation of Hegel, however, appropriates Hegel's philosophy for his own purposes and presents an account of Hegel's philosophy as inadequate for contemporary concerns. See: Derrida, J. 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Writing and Difference*, Bass, A. tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

objects have only a limited independence in relation to the self, and hence they can be negated relatively easily in the self's assertion of its self-identity. Where the self does however gain satisfaction, argues Hegel, where it becomes self-conscious, is when it confronts another intelligent self: when the opposing not-self or, other, is an intelligent self. Hegel argues: "Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness".³⁷ For Hegel:

A self-consciousness exists *for a self-consciousness*. Only so is it in fact self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in its otherness become explicit for it. The 'I' which is the object of its Notion is in fact not 'object'; the object of Desire, however, is only independent, for it is the universal indestructible substance, the fluid self-identical essence. A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much 'I' as 'object'. With this, we already have before us the Notion of *Spirit*. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is — this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence; 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I' [*ich, das Wir, und Wir, das Ich ist*]. It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning point, where it leaves behind it the colourful show of the sensuous here and now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present.³⁸

For Hegel, the self only finds some form of certainty in its pursuit of self-knowledge when it begins to comprehend itself in relation to another intelligent self that stands before it as the not-self. The self may only comprehend its unity or self-identity through a comprehension of how it is *constituted* through a relation of *mediation* with the other. The relation of mediation between self and other constitutes the limits of the self; the boundaries of the self are drawn or produced through the active relation of mediation between self and other, and through the self's reflection upon this relation as the operation of self-inscription and self-positing.

In this respect the self is not something that exists before coming into contact with the world but is itself *produced* through its relation of

³⁷ Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 110–1.

mediation with its others. On this side of thinking and self-reflection the creative, constitutive, spontaneous act of thinking occurs *as mediation itself* — it is mediation (*Vermittlung*). In a sense, for Hegel, the self or 'I' is always mediated, its act of thinking is always an act of mediation with its self and with its other. The 'I' is a middle term, it is a middle and process of mediation between the self and the other. From such a standpoint the 'I' needs to be understood as a 'We'. The self cannot be thought as the merely atomistic individual but is always a process of mediation such that the concept of 'self' now includes within it the process of co-constitution between intelligent beings. For Hegel, self-consciousness is a relation between immediacy and mediation, a relation between the drive of the immediate 'I' for its self-identity and the reflection upon the constitution of selves through their others as a 'We': a relation between the notions of the *subject as spirit* and *spirit as subject*.

For Hegel, understood as a relation between immediacy and mediation, the attempt of the self to know itself concurrently involves the effort to see-into or know the other. Only through knowing what the other is, might the self more firmly comprehend itself and come to understand the content and limits of itself. Hegel calls the process of attempting to comprehend the not-self, or the other, the process of recognition (*Anerkennung*).³⁹ Hegel sketches two forms or outcomes of this process which are not mutually exclusive.⁴⁰ The first involves a successful moment of

³⁹ The term 'recognition' is taken by Hegel from Fichte, though Hegel's philosophical employment of the term is far more radical. See: Fichte, J.G. *Foundations of Natural Right*, Neuhouser, F. ed. Baur, M. tr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁰ For an account which emphasizes these two moments of recognition see: Williams, R.R. *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Contrast this to the account given in Kojève, A. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Nichols, J.H. tr. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1980). While Kojève has done much to draw attention to the importance of Hegel's theory of recognition, his account of the theory is limited. Kojève's account only gives emphasis to the moment of struggle and does not give due regard to moments of mutual recognition present within the *Realphilosophie*, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*. Another important Marxist account of Hegel's theory of recognition is the interpretation and extrapolation given by Slavoj Žižek. See: Žižek, S. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1989); and Žižek, S. *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). While Žižek's use of recognition is a novel and powerful critique of modern society and culture, his interpretation of Hegel through Lacan has a tendency to reduce or structure recognition

recognition in which each self recognises itself as mutually recognising the other.⁴¹ The second involves an unsuccessful moment of recognition in which one self is recognised and the other is recognising.⁴² This unsuccessful moment involves the operation of *misrecognition*.⁴³

In the successful moment, or moment of mutual recognition, each intelligent self is faced by the fact that their not-self is also an intelligent being. In this moment what was formerly simply something other and defined only negatively in relation to the self, is now seen to have a content, as intelligence, which is not completely alien to the self's comprehension of itself. The self's recognition of the other does involve a moment of identification with the other but does not involve the reduction of the other to the same. Rather, in the process of recognition the self comes to know and appreciate the position and status of the not-self within its own self. The self comes to recognise and appreciate *the other within itself*. For Hegel, in recognising the other within itself, the self affirms this otherness and therefore does not try to negate the other, but lets the other go free.⁴⁴ What is recognised is not simply the other, but the constitutive role of the other in the self, the necessity of the other for the self to be itself. Recognition involves an affirmation by the self that a necessary and essential element of itself resides in the other and in the relation of mediation with it.

For Hegel, the moment of successful, mutual recognition is bound up with the moment of unsuccessful recognition, or misrecognition. In

around the Lacanian 'void'. For a critique of Žižek's reading of Hegel see: Dews, P. *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy*, (London: Verso, 1995). For an account of the French reception of Hegel see: Butler, J.P. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁴¹ Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 112.

⁴² *Ibid*, 113.

⁴³ The term is taken from Gillian Rose, see: Rose, G. *Hegel Contra Sociology*, (London: Athlone, 1981); Rose, G. *Mourning Becomes the Law*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For more general accounts of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* see: Pippin, R.B. *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Pinkard, T. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See also: Williams, R.R. *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*, (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1992); Honneth, A. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Anderson, J. tr. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 112.

the operation of misrecognition the self proceeds in relation to its now intelligent other in the same way it proceeded in relation to the world at large. That is, the self in its drive towards self-identity and self-certainty affirms itself by negating its other. In the moment of misrecognition the self does not recognise the other within itself or the relation of mutual co-constitution between self and other, it merely sees its immediate view of self as significant and everything else as insignificant.

Further, misrecognition can be interpreted as involving the operation of *error* within the moment of self-reflection. The *mis* of misrecognition refers to a moment of cognitive error, mistake, and slippage or a moment where self-consciousness cannot get past elements of its own immediacy to comprehend its mediated nature. The *mis* of misrecognition also involves the operation of finitude within human cognition in its efforts to comprehend the infinite. In a sense, the finite self can only comprehend its infinite mediated character, by grasping differing parts that make up a whole. In attempting to grasp itself as a unity or a whole the self can only grasp fragile, weak, limited moments of itself in its relations to its many others.

For Hegel, the recurrent moment of error does not condemn the self's attempt to know itself and the world to failure. Rather, the process of recognition describes the effort of a spontaneous, creative human intelligence attempting to come to terms with its own errors and limitations. This involves a certain restlessness of thinking — thinking's desire — which is always pushed by itself to reach beyond its own limitations.⁴⁵ In this respect, the self's recognition of the other does not just happen once, it is instead an act of thinking that needs to be repeated again and again. As a process every cognition needs to be continually re-recognised as the self will only come to some form of self-certainty through ongoing acts, efforts and errors. Further, recognition draws attention to the creative aspect of human thinking whereby it only begins to develop by coming to terms with its own errors. The capacity of thinking to come to terms with error, limitation, and contradiction more generally is given significant emphasis by Hegel.

⁴⁵ On the 'restlessness' contained within thinking as presented by Hegel, see: Nancy, J.-L. *The Speculative Remark: One of Hegel's Bon Mots*, Suprenant, C. tr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Nancy, J.-L. *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, Smith, J. and Miller, S. tr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

If operating purely within the realm of thinking misrecognition, error, mistake and the assertion of a naive sense of self-certainty against the other would not have violent consequences. Hegel, however, places the recognising self within a living, physical world of intelligent human subjects. In this context the moment of misrecognition of the other, the refusal to recognise the other, the act of self-positing at the expense of the other, and the negation of the other, all have physical, material consequences. Hegel quite clearly describes this as *violence*: the seeking of the death of the other and the staking of the self's own life so that two selves engage in a life and death struggle.⁴⁶ In this struggle each self learns not only that the other is independent, but, also, that as a living being the self may also be treated as an object that can be negated. In a sense, through being negated by the other's misrecognition, the self is faced with its own limits and its extreme finitude within the possibility of death. For Hegel, through relative levels of power and the fear of death, one self succumbs to the other, recognises the other as master (*Herr*) and assumes the subservient position of slave (*Knecht*).⁴⁷

Through this account Hegel can be seen to be presenting quite a stark and original theory which draws attention to the relation between the act of thinking and the deeds that occur in the natural, physical world. For Hegel the act of self-positing and the act of negation have physical consequences which impact upon the self's attempt to gain knowledge of itself. In one sense, Hegel's account of recognition draws attention to a certain form of violence, or at least the unaccounted for possibility of violence, residing within the transcendental philosophy of Kant and Fichte. In abstracting from the world, this transcendental philosophy abstracts from violence. However, to the extent that Kant and Fichte speak of a self-consciousness which exists in the world, then their account participates in a form of violence which they remain unaware of or hide. Such an unawareness impacts upon their attempts to construct a practical, moral philosophy. In another sense, Hegel begins to point to one significant theoretical form of comprehending human, social violence based upon the operation of positing and negation within human thinking. Through Hegel the *deeds* of thinking become closely related to the physical deeds of human life: a certain violence of positing and negativity.

⁴⁶ Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 113–4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

III

So what does Hegel in these passages present to philosophy? Amongst other things Hegel presents a radical and original account of the metaphysics of subjectivity. For the first time in the history of Western philosophy Hegel draws together the relationships between thinking and action and between negativity and violence and shows their central role in the production of the human subject and its construction (and destruction) of its world.

Hegel radicalises the Fichtean idea of thoughts as deeds. What for Fichte was an act only at a transcendental level is shown by Hegel to be also an act within the physical, material and social world. Positing and negation become the activities that link the transcendental subject to its world. In this link, or relation of mediation, it is the subject's activity that is shown to be necessary and essential. The active, creative and destructive subject thinks both itself and its world, it is physically shaped and moulded by its material environment, and it is represented and constructed by the thoughts and acts of other thinking subjects. These acts of self-positing, inter-subjective positing and negation sit in a causal relationship with both the comprehension of the transcendental subject (as it is portrayed by differing historical modes of philosophical reflection) and the living human subject within politics, ethics and the social world. Hegel shows that the thinking subject, the 'I', whose primacy is given to modern philosophy by Descartes and Kant and which stands as the central figure of Enlightenment rationality and liberalism, is fundamentally connected to history, inter-subjectivity and the social-material world. The question of where the 'not-I' ends and the 'I' begins (and *visa versa*), framed by Hegel as *the question* of modern subjectivity, continues to chastise modern philosophy, even if many philosophers and theorists are unaware that they are being chastised by a modern question arranged (at least in part) by Hegel.

By drawing out conceptually how thoughts operate as deeds Hegel's account grasps the world creating function of modern subjectivity. Because the subject's positing of itself and its account of the world (i.e. of how the world *is* and *should* be in relation to the self) is also a physical

positing through individual and (later⁴⁸) through institutional force, the subject's acts of positing and negation, as a form of labour, create and shape the social-material world. A modern world is created not simply by the subject's learning of its ability to shape and create objects and master the physical world, but also at an institutional level through the positing of laws, through the positing of economic, ethical and political modes of thought that arrange and order social life, and finally through positing as war.

Such a creative character of modern subjectivity is also profoundly destructive. Every act of positing contains a moment of negation and this moment of negation bears out differing degrees of immediate and institutional violence. The negativity and violence within the subject cannot be separated from the self-positing of the subject at any level. Every act of positing will involve a moment of differentiation and negation which, if it does not amount to violence, institutes a potentiality of violence — a *not-yet*⁴⁹ violence, that may be enacted or realised at some point in the future. Hegel's account draws out the links between transcendental (*a priori*) negativity, the desire for self-identity, negation, violence, mastery and domination. For Hegel this is not the whole of subjectivity but it is an important part which creeps into and upsets all knowledge, action and ethical effort. The religious aspect of Hegel's thought gives this negativity a certain role, purpose and moment of redemption.⁵⁰ For those of us who might not share Hegel's speculative account of religion and who look back on the violent train wreck of modern, Enlightenment enthusiasm that was the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (inclusive of romanticism, nationalism, colonialism and imperialism), then we may view the negativity and violence within subjectivity somewhat differently. The violence of our recent history offers us a lesson. That is, the status of contemporary attempts to outline both a philosophy of the subject and a philosophy

⁴⁸ For example, Hegel's account of the operation of institutional positing as negation during the French Terror. See: Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 355–363.

⁴⁹ To use a term taken from Ernst Bloch. See: Bloch, E. *The Spirit of Utopia*, Nassar, A.A. tr. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁰ I.e. negativity, violence and death played a different role to Hegel as a Christian philosopher than it does to more secular thinkers today. For an account of the religious elements of Hegel's thinking see: Küng, H. *The Incarnation of God: An Introduction to Hegel's Theological Thought as a Prolegomena to a Future Christianity*, Stephenson, J.R. tr. (New York: Crossword, 1987).

of ethics will be inadequate if they do not pay enough attention to the negativity and violence imbedded within human subjectivity.

If we take seriously the Hegelian account of the operation of positing and negation within subjectivity, or at least, if we give it some degree of credence, then it would be naive to attempt to ground an ethics or politics upon the notion of a 'non-violent ethics' or a 'non-violent relationship to the other'.⁵¹ Rather, a better approach would be to attempt to develop an idea of ethics and politics which understands the negativity and violence contained within human subjectivity, and knowing this, sets up practices and institutions that might predict and minimise resultant harm. One aspect of a future ethics and politics built along these lines could be grounded upon a *praxis* of recognition — one which paid attention to and planned for the *mis* of misrecognition. While a *praxis* of recognition cannot be the whole of ethics or politics it does offer a way of characterising ethical decision and political action in a manner that is consistent with the violence and negativity that resides at the heart of the modern subject.

⁵¹ See: Cornell, D. *The Philosophy of the Limit*, (New York: Routledge, 1992).