

**THE LIMITS OF RECOGNITION: HEGEL, MATERIALISM,
AND PANPSYCHISM**

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This contribution outlines several questions concerning the very paradigm of intersubjective recognition in post-Hegelian German philosophy in response to the work of Jon Stewart and Axel Honneth. It briefly traces, in conjunction with Stewart's recent book on recognition, how discontent with this Hegelian paradigm, and its prioritization of spirit over nature, informed developments in nineteenth-century materialism (Karl Marx) and panpsychism (Gustav Fechner, Eduard von Hartmann). While Marx analyzed the political-economic and metabolic entanglement of humans and nature, the German panpsychic philosophers elucidated the bio-psychological interconnectedness of human and natural life. Both express forms of relation, developed in confrontation with Hegel, which are still inadequately addressed in recognition theory and contemporary critical social theory. Hegelian inspired thinkers, such as Honneth, continue to overly prioritize social second nature and reciprocal human recognition while marginalizing other asymmetrical relations that are crucial to humans living within animal, environmental, and material life.

Keywords: Alienation – Hegel – Recognition – Philosophy of Nature – Materialism
– Panpsychism

Introduction

It is an honor to have this opportunity to address themes from Jon Stewart's recent work *Hegel's Century: Alienation and Recognition in a Time of Revolution* (Stewart 2021). I first encountered Professor Stewart's work as a graduate student in the late 1990's when I read the volume *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Stewart 1996). Jon's works have been a powerful force in the renaissance in Hegel studies over the last two decades. His present historically rich and conceptually complex work on alienation and recognition continues the reevaluation of Hegel's philosophy and its legacy. In this brief reflection, I hope to supplement Stewart's narrative by considering: (1) how Marx's materialism and nineteenth-century German panpsychism attempted to overcome the priority of spirit that underlies the dialectic of recognition and alienation and (2) some implications of these issues for contemporary social theory and environmental philosophy.

Both the philosophy and its consequences have been inexorably debated, as Stewart's work traces, beginning in Hegel's lifetime with the confrontations between so-called old and young, right and left-Hegelians. The structural empiricist philosopher and psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, no friend of Hegel, had to admit in an 1877 review of nineteenth-century German philosophy that while Hegel was not the most prominent figure within either academic or popular German philosophy (these were for Wundt, respectively, Kant and Schopenhauer), Hegel was the most influential figure for academic and popular philosophy taken as a whole given the prominence of academic right-Hegelian and popular left-Hegelian discourses (Wundt 1877).

Wundt did not analyze the core of Hegel's continuing inspirational appeal to his students and successors, despite suspicions concerning his speculative metaphysics and conservative politics throughout the nineteenth-century. This problem would lead Wilhelm Dilthey in the 1905 *The History of Hegel's Youth* (Dilthey 1990) and György Lukács in the 1938 *The Young Hegel* (Lukács 1948) to endeavor to reconstruct the liberal (in Dilthey's pioneering work) or revolutionary (in Lukács's Marxist reading) core of Hegel's dialectic.

It has become only more difficult to dismiss Hegel as a mere reactionary obscurantist since Dilthey pioneered the liberalizing and demetaphysicalized (in the sense of social second nature) reinterpretation of Hegel (Dilthey 1990). Recent thinkers such as Axel Honneth and John McDowell continue to prioritize social second nature and intersubjectivity based on Hegel's philosophy of spirit (Honneth 1994; McDowell 1996). As this strategy systematically marginalizes other forms of interaction, the very paradigm of recognition deserves to be radically questioned.

I. The Struggle and Ethics of Recognition from Hegel to Honneth and Stewart

Stewart's rich and insightful study deftly traces how the key moments of recognition and alienation shaped and stimulated Hegel's own thinking and subsequent thought. There are myriad interpretations that can be brought into dialogue with this book. Due to time, I can mention only a few, beginning with the contemporary Frankfurt School philosopher and social theorist Honneth, in order to formulate a few questions for consideration and discussion.

Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1994) is a recent powerful example of the enduring significance of Hegel's analysis of the intersubjective dynamics of recognition, as Honneth makes it the guiding basis of contemporary critical social theory. One immediate difference between Honneth and Stewart concerns the systematic and developmental role of recognition in Hegel's philosophy. Stewart highlights the priority of recognition throughout Hegel's writings. Honneth, by contrast, argues that it is only primary and has a radical character in the Jena

writings, plays a reduced role in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and then is subordinated to his idealism. Honneth thus proposes radicalizing this Jena moment and reconstructing it as a contemporary social theory independently of Hegel's mature metaphysical and political commitments. My first question concerns how to adjudicate this difference in interpretations.

There are several intersections that indicate basic questions about the philosophy of recognition. The first to note is that both works stress how the young Hegel in the Jena writings and the *Phenomenology* is responding to the struggle for existence expressed in Hobbes' state of nature, which serves as the basis for his social contract theory and questionable identification of sovereignty with the state, and Fichte's theory of recognition in his philosophy of natural law. It becomes pertinent to ask to what extent recognition only occurs in and as mutual struggle and to what extent it is opposed to and resolves social struggle. While the former indicates the realist features of Hegel's mature political philosophy, and how it thematizes the right of the state and its role in internal and external conflicts; the latter emphasizes the rationality, equality, and autonomy of individuals that is accentuated in different ways by Stewart and Honneth.

This emphasis also raises the issue of the relationship between Hegelian recognition and Kantian respect, which has not been at the center of discussions about the sources of Hegel's theory of recognition. On the one hand, Kantian respect has its own dimension of struggle, as individuals place a moral claim on others to have their moral status recognized by others. On the other hand, liberalizing accounts of Hegel's social thought that highlight the relational individual, and not only state and society, appear to reconnect Hegelian and Kantian ethics, despite Hegel's own critical distance to Kant, as they both rejected an isolated, non-moral, unbounded individual subject. These tensions already appear in Dilthey's reconstruction of the young republican and pantheistic Hegel, as he sought to liberalize and pluralize Hegel's social categories to break their apparent conservatism and privileging of the state over the relational individual engaged in various forms of interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) instead of a struggle for recognition.

II. Questioning the Paradigm of Intersubjective Recognition

The next intersection to be considered is how the Hegelian paradigm of recognition defines the human, as a particular way of being socially human, and whether this is appropriate to what Hannah Arendt described in *The Human Condition* as the intrinsic natality and plurality of human life that is irreducible to any given definition of society and the social (Arendt 2013). Natality signifies that the self can always depart from and begin anew, even under the most oppressive forms of society, and plurality that there are myriad ways of being for oneself and for others that she opposes to both

rightwing nationalist and leftwing communist traditions as deformations of the republican idea of collective self-determination. Consequently, we might consider, with Dilthey and Arendt, whether we should liberally pluralize (as in Honneth) or rather thoroughly break-with the recognition model of intersubjectivity. Do we need to give more weight to relational plurality and individuality in society (as in Dilthey or Arendt) or even more radically alterity and non-identity (as with Levinas or Adorno)?

Stewart and Honneth both stress the human intersubjective character of relationships of recognition and how this model makes intranatural relationships at best secondary and parasitical and at worst irrelevant. The other side of the question of the human accordingly concerns the strong opposition in Hegel between spirit as active subject, formed by the dynamics of recognition or consciousness, and nature as passive object. It is a real question whether the recognition model is adequate to encompass or even harmful to human relations with animals, plants, rivers, mountains, ecosystems, and environments. Even as Hegel is a radically relational thinker, he overly separates and opposes the holistic relationships of spirit to the atomism and mechanism of matter and nature. Hegel's philosophy presupposes a fundamental break between nature and spirit that distorts how humans relate within the natural metabolic nexus of life and how they recognize natural beings and environments as having a life of their own.

The recognition paradigm requires the symmetrical and mutual acknowledgement of two subjects, thereby making asymmetrical bioethical, environmental, and material relations secondary. Can we begin to appreciate the asymmetrical relationships where we acknowledge the table, the cat, or the tree without expecting it to answer, respond, or recognize in a human way? This, indeed, became a key problem in post-Hegelian German philosophy. It is a theme in Marx's materialist transformation of Hegel that transitioned from the struggle for recognition to the material conditions of labor and the metabolic interactions between humans and their material-environmental conditions. It likewise becomes a key question in the Schopenhauerian and panpsychic (or hylozoistic) critiques and reinterpretations of Hegel's idealism expressed in the works of Gustav Fechner, Hermann Lotze (in a qualified way), Ernst Haeckel, Eduard von Hartmann, and Friedrich Paulsen.

III. German Panpsychism in the Wake of Hegel

Marxist and panpsychic philosophers critically responded to the subordination and alienation of nature under Hegel's primacy of spirit. Stewart's book tracks the dynamic dialectic of recognition and alienation in post-Hegelian thought. Another dimension, operative in the materialist and panpsychic reactions to Hegel, is a recovery of a relational sense of nature that responds to alienation from nature while seeking to remain consistent with the paradigm of natural scientific inquiry.

Let us first consider panpsychism, a widespread trend in nineteenth-century Germany, before turning to Marx and critical social theory. The panpsychists were committed to divergent philosophical perspectives; yet they sought to articulate the deeper bonds and interconnections between humans, things, and cosmos. While some explicitly rejected Hegel, others sought to revise the Hegelian model of spirit. Hartmann, primarily remembered through his influential *Philosophy of the Unconscious* (1869), is an interesting example. Hartmann objected in his 1870 proposed revision of Hegel's philosophy to Hegel's panlogism, deficient sense of nature, and bifurcation of nature and history (Hartmann 1870, 398 – 399). He sought in a later work to reconstruct Hegelian spirit in view of Schopenhauer's unconscious and Schelling's philosophy of nature to overcome human alienation from nature by embracing humans as participants in the living networks of nature (Hartmann 1897).

One specific problematic at stake in this discourse was the sensitivity and ethical status of animals and plants. To consider the more radical example of plants, Fechner argued in his 1848 work *Nanna: Über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen* (*Nanna: On the Mental Life of Plants*) for a deeper recognition of the life of plants based on panpsychic arguments concerning their sensitivity and inner life. Hartmann could write an essay "Der Blumenluxus" ("Flower-Luxury") a few decades later describing with horror the decorative uses of dead flowers and butterflies. The sensitivity of plants is in his philosophy an expression of a shared unconscious panpneumatic life. The acknowledgment of the life of plants entails enjoying them in their own living environments and using them with moderation and respect (Hartmann 1888, 106 – 112).¹

The panpsychic interest in human recognition of the spiritual life of plants stimulated Fritz Jahr to formulate the concept of bioethics in 1927 (Jahr 2013). In this context too, to complement Stewart's analysis, we see how Hegel's thought remained a point of contention that helped inform – often through criticism – the emergence of preliminary forms of bioethics and environmental ethics in the early twentieth-century. Nineteenth-century panpsychic discourses indicate alternative models of human relations with animals, plants, and natural worlds, even if we no longer wish to commit ourselves to this metaphysical position. Non-dualism and parsimony constitute its primary theoretical justifications, as in Galen Strawson's arguments in its favor (Strawson 2006), but its most significant implications concern the need for an ethos of things and nature.²

¹ Hartmann's arguments did not lead him to advocate abstention, which he considered too ascetic. In earlier essays in the same volume, he rejected vegetarianism and advocated responsible use of animals and plants.

² On the ethos of things, and a different response to it based on an interpretation of early Daoist sources and Heidegger, see Nelson 2023.

IV. Material and Environmental Relationality beyond Intersubjective Recognition

Does the present ecological crisis demand that we limit Hegel's recognition paradigm to human relations or expand it asymmetrically to all relations in which humans participate? In either case, as Marx indicated with his analyses of alienation from oneself, others, and nature in the 1840s and of the metabolic relation in his mature critique of capitalism, it is evident that we can no longer remain with intersubjective models of spirit or society that bifurcate the reproduction of intersubjectivity and the reproduction of human existence within relations of material and environmental life.

Chapter six of Stewart's book adroitly illuminates the dynamic of recognition and alienation in Marx's project. Another sense of alienation operative in Marx is alienation from nature. On the one hand, this alienation is linked with failures of intersubjective recognition. On the other hand, it involves material and environmental relations that cannot be analyzed solely through the categories of intersubjective recognition and alienation. The historical tensions and rifts between humans and the natural world remained a fundamental question for the materialist Marxist transmission, as evident in Adorno's analysis of natural history and the domination of nature, which was lost in the priority of intersubjectivity in recent generations of the Frankfurt School (compare Nelson 2020, 25 – 89). However, these issues of material existence continue to indicate the limits of the priority of recognition and intersubjectivity operative in contemporary critical theoretical models. The senses of nature, as mediated natural history, operative in Marx or Adorno have become merely metaphorical expressions and secondary issues, as Habermas has prioritized intersubjectivity interpreted as communicative action and Honneth the struggle for recognition to diagnose the dynamics of intersubjectivity and power.

Honneth has effectively improved upon Habermas's excessive cognitivism by expanding the complexity of the social. Nonetheless, even as the paradigm of intersubjectivity has been extended to analyze power relations and the multicultural particularities of historical lifeworlds more effectively, it remains overly ensnared in anthropocentrism and the "primacy of the social." This priority of intersubjectivity, second nature, spirit, and social constitution appears inadequate to both (1) biological-natural and material relations and, more generally, (2) relational alterity and asymmetry.

Hegel's paradigm of recognition and its contemporary adaptations have proven insufficient at exposing the relations and tensions between "first" and "second" nature, or the material and the social. Such tensions in Hegel helped motivate Marx's articulation of the metabolic relations between humans and their environments, Friedrich Engels' phenomenology of material embodiment (compare Stewart 2022, 75 – 99) and dialectics of nature, and Adorno's diagnosis of natural history and the domination of nature.

These concerns have been lost in the turn toward the priority of the social interpreted as intersubjectivity and/or structural systems of power.

V. Conclusion: Toward an Ecological Transformation of Recognition

Despite the limits of the nineteenth-century panpsychic and materialist models briefly outlined in this paper, they, nonetheless, indicate ways to question the human reification of and alienation from nature by perceiving ourselves not only as reflexive relational participants in symmetrical social relations of recognition (as in Honneth) but also in asymmetrical environmental and material relations. These models can be critically reimaged for the present natural historical crisis-situation.

Panpsychic and materialist responses to Hegel consequently indicate significant modifications to the paradigm of recognition and critical social theory, encouraging a greater sense of human participation in the interdependent nexus of ecological and material life. Ecological democracy does not only demand intersubjective recognition but embracing responsive participation and (to adopt an expression from Donna J. Haraway) “making-with” (*sympoiesis*) within interactively reproduced environments (Haraway 2016). This conclusion entails that the theory of recognition must be freed from the anthropocentric priority of spirit and reconceived to encompass asymmetrical forms of respect and acknowledgement of non-human others from animals and plants to local and global ecosystems.

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