**From Interacting Substances to Recognizing Persons: On the Logical Foundations of Hegel’s Theory of Recognition**

Let me begin by briefly stating two apparently unrelated puzzles about Hegel’s texts:

1. Hegel claims to offer a kind of deduction of freedom from necessity at the end of the *Essence Logic*. The transition starts from an account of substances and accidents, of the causal power and activity of those substances, and of the interaction between those substances. In particular, interaction, as a two-way causal relation of substances, culminates when “necessity unveils itself” and “becomes” freedom (6.239/11.409; cp. 6.250-1/12.15-6).[[1]](#footnote-1) What does this mean? How does this argument work?
2. In his discussions of spirit, Hegel everywhere insists on the importance and centrality of freedom. The very nature of spirit, he says, is freedom (see Enc §482ff), and at least part of what he means is that the freedom of the individual is and ought to be one of the most important pillars for modern life. But he also maintains that free individuals are “accidents” in relation to the ethical life that sustains them (see PR §145). To be an accident is to be inessential, dispensable, of no deep significance. How can we square these two claims?[[2]](#footnote-2)

These two problems concern different parts of Hegel’s corpus, and they appear to touch on very different philosophical domains (metaphysics and philosophy of science in the one case, political philosophy in the other). I will argue that in fact we can solve each problem by putting it in connection with the other. Recognition, I will argue, is a kind of interaction. Specifically, I argue in §2 that both interaction and recognition are reciprocal activities that cannot be decomposed into one-way activities and in §3 that the activities involved in each perpetuate themselves, or are such as to have no termination (unless interrupted).

Reflecting on these shared features, and on the differences between (mere) interaction and recognition, enables us to solve both textual puzzles: in §4, I explain Hegel’s claim that necessity unveils itself as freedom by arguing that interaction, as the highest form of necessity, does not provide the conceptual resources required to stably individuate the interacting substances, while recognition does. Thinking through what recognition has that (mere) interaction lacks, I show that the required resources to stably individuate the interacting individuals must consist in those individuals acting through the concept of themselves so as to negate that which differentiates them from one another. Acting through one’s concept is freedom, and so necessity unveils itself as freedom. In §5, I then use this analysis to explain Hegel’s claim that the individuals that engage in recognitive relations are indeed accidents relative to the substantial ethical powers, but that they are the kind of accidents that have as their task ceasing to be accidents by acting in light of the concepts of themselves provided by those ethical powers. In ceasing to be accidents, the free individuals retain their centrality for Hegel’s political philosophy.

Before getting into any of that, however, I first want to present the textual case for connecting the topics of interaction and recognition.

**§1 Recognition and Interaction: the Textual Case for their Connection**

In this section, I will present a textual case for connecting recognition and interaction. Before turning to the direct textual evidence from Hegel’s own writings, it’s worth briefly noting that the historical context would have made such a claim seem less bizarre.

The most important bit of context comes from Fichte’s *Foundations of Natural Right*, where he very clearly draws on the idea of interaction in his account of mutual recognition. In his discussion of the relation of free beings that sets up the foundation of right, he notes that each’s cognition of the other is mutually conditioned by each treating the other as a free being. He then notes that this mutual conditioning relation “is a relation of 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” (Fichte 1845, 3:44; 2000, 42 trans. altered).[[3]](#footnote-3) That is, recognition is a certain kind of interaction, an interaction that occurs “through intelligence and freedom.” So, Fichte defends the thesis that mutual recognition is intelligent or free interaction.

Fichte, in turn, is very likely drawing on Kant’s categories for his claim. Kant equates the category of community with interaction (Kant 1998, A211ff/B256ff), and sees that category as deployed both by the understanding in reciprocal causal determinations of substances in time (in the 3rd Analogy) and by practical reason in the guise of the systematic community of moral agents, though he does not there use the word “Wechselwirkung” (Kant 1996, 5:66). Fichte’s idea of mutual recognition as free interaction is presumably Fichte’s way of spelling out Kant’s architectonic in light of his own theory of the centrality of recognitive relations for freedom.

Now I turn to Hegel’s own texts. And the first point to note is that he makes something very much like Fichte’s own point. In his discussion of the transition from interaction and necessity to freedom, he notes that what interacts are “free realities” (6.216/11.408). I shall later argue that the paradigm case of interaction as he describes it is the gravitational relation between bodies. I do not think he means to claim that Mars and Venus are free realities. Rather, I think he is preparing the way for the transition to the *Concept Logic*. In light of the context from Fichte, this reference to free realities at least suggests a reference to recognition relations between self-conscious beings, and echoes Fichte’s claim that recognition relations are interactions through freedom.

Second, in his account of one-way causal relations at the end of the *Essence Logic*, just before his discussion of interaction, Hegel introduces a definition of “violence” (Gewalt): “Violence is *the appearance of power* or *power as external*” (6.235/11.405). This discussion of violence seems to be totally out of place in a discussion of a causal relation between an active and a passive substance closely connected to Newton’s law of the equality of action and reaction. But it is *not* out of place, if we follow Kant and Fichte’s lead and understand the categories at issue at the end of the *Essence Logic* to admit of both theoretical and practical deployments. Following that lead, the appeal to violence appears to be closely connected to Hegel’s discussions of the process of recognition, those forms of recognition which precede mutual recognition (see, in particular, the Remark to §433 in the *Encyclopedia*, and the discussion of violence in the section on Wrong in the *Philosophy of Right*, §§84, 86, 90).

Third and finally, the most significant textual indication occurs in the opening of Hegel’s discussion of objective spirit in the *Encyclopedia*. While describing the reality of spirit in a human community with its various practices and institutions, Hegel notes that this reality consists in a purposive activity to realize freedom in those practices and institutions, and thereby realize the concept of spirit in the world. And then he uses an *Essence Logic* distinction to characterize the reality of that activity:

Freedom, shaped into the reality of a world, contains the *form of necessity*, the substantial connection of which is the system of the determinations of freedom and the appearing connection of which is as *power*, as *being recognized*, i.e., its validity in consciousness (§484; cp. *Philosophy of Right*, §210).

Characterized with respect to its substance, the law or system that articulates the what-it-is of this activity is the law of freedom. Characterized with respect to its appearance, the activity of realizing freedom is power, the power that consists in being recognized and so regarded as valid by the consciousness on which it acts.

The kind of recognition he invokes in this passage is the recognition by an individual of the authority of the activity of realizing freedom on herself. This activity of realizing freedom is the activity of realizing the concept of that which is engaged in the activity. So, in recognizing the authority of this activity, the individual recognizes that the activity is an activity of realizing her own concept. Put this together with the background from Fichte and the discussion of “free realities” at the end of the *Essence Logic*, and we get the following picture: I recognize our activity as authoritative for me, and in doing so I am free. The activity in question “contains the form of necessity,” because in it power is exercised on me by a system, or a set of laws, that thus determine me with necessity. This necessity is my own, but equally essentially its being my own must appear to me as my recognition of it (as authoritative, by being mine). Thus, this system of necessity has given rise to freedom. As these are the very terms Hegel uses to describe the transition from the *Essence Logic* to the *Concept Logic* (see §4), the textual case that Hegel connects interaction with recognition is, I think, conclusive, and the evidence that Hegel thinks of recognition as a kind of interaction compelling.

**§2 Reciprocal Determination in Interaction and Recognition**

In this section, I will begin to get in view the abstract structure that is common to both interaction and recognition. The basic structure is that each involves distinct individuals that are determined in some manner in virtue of the reciprocal activity of these individuals on one another, and that the activity in each “returns back” to the individuals determined by it.

Towards the beginning of his discussion of interaction, Hegel writes: “Initially, interaction presents itself as a reciprocal [gegenseitige] causality of *presupposed*, self *conditioning substances*; each is in relation to the other [gegen] *at the same time* active and passive substance” (6.238/11.407). Where substances interact, each presupposes the others in that they are not the sufficient source of the actuality of those other substances. Moreover, the presupposed substances causally condition that which presupposes them. And this relation is reciprocal, such that the substance is both causally determined by those substances it presupposes and causally determines them. This means that each substance is passive in relation to the other substances, and active in relation to the other substances, and it can only be the one by being the other. So interacting substances are determined by virtue of their reciprocal activity on one another.

The obvious example of interaction is the gravitational relations between bodies.[[4]](#footnote-4) Venus is where it is and moves as it does as a result of the causal influence of other heavenly bodies being where they are and moving as they move. But, in turn, each of those other bodies are where they are and move as they move as a result of the causal influence of other heavenly bodies, including Venus. So Venus is both causally active and passive in its determination.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Now I turn to recognition. A great deal has been written about this, and Hegel describes recognition in many different places in his corpus. But our treatment can be selective: we seek an account of recognition which brings into sharp relief its status as reciprocal activity.

Hegel offers a characterization of recognition that is helpful in this regard in the *Encyclopedia* account of universal self-consciousness. There he notes that

*Universal self-consciousness* is the affirmative knowledge of its self in the other self, in which each, as free individuality has *absolute independence*; however, by means of the negation of its immediacy or desire, none distinguishes [unterscheidet] itself from the others, each is universal and objective and so has real [reelle] universality as reciprocity [Gegenseitigkeit], as it knows itself recognized in the free other and knows this insofar as it recognizes the other and knows it [to be] free (EPG §436).

Universal self-consciousness is that form of consciousness that succeeds the struggle for recognition. In it, each is free only in being recognized as free by the other. Since this is universal, it is reciprocal, so that it is equally true that each is free only in recognizing the other as free. In the struggle for recognition, each self-consciousness differentiates itself from the others by virtue of its desire, a desire which is satisfiable by it alone or is such that its satisfaction excludes the satisfaction of the desire of the other. Desiring self-consciousnesses are not in interaction with one another: each determines (or attempts to determine) the other, but those determinations are not reciprocal. I desire to satisfy my desire through you, but your desire is not responsible for my desire and my desire is not responsible for yours. But, that desire negated, each self-consciousness is free by means of recognizing the others as free. So, freedom is a determination each has in virtue of the reciprocal activity of each on each.

Thus, both interaction and recognition involve distinct individuals that are determined in virtue of the reciprocal activity of these individuals on one another. This is still in need of clarification, as it is not obvious what kind of reciprocal activity can have this character. But already, just from this abstract gloss, we can arrive at one important consequence for both interaction and recognition: neither interaction nor recognition can be built up from or decomposed into one-way determinations.

This is implicit in Hegel’s claim that the recognitive relation involved in being free is one in which I must know myself to be recognized by another and to recognize that other. Freedom requires that I recognize the other as free as that other recognizes me as free – in this way, my recognition of the other is a manner in which I am reflected back into myself and so a manner in which I determine myself (see EPG §436z). As Terry Pinkard puts it, freedom-conferring recognition is not like a game of “tag” (Pinkard 2021, 598).

Similarly for interaction: a substance that stands in interaction with another substance cannot acquire the relevant determination by first being given that determination from elsewhere. A substance cannot stand in gravitational relations with other substances by being given that determination from those other substances, in one-way causal processes. The determinations at issue in interaction come online at once and together.

One might object to my argument as follows: while it is true the reciprocal activity at issue in interaction and recognition must involve mutual determination, that mutual determination can be decomposed into two co-occurring one-way processes. Yeomans has offered an account of interaction along these lines. He understands interaction to consist in the causal action of an active substance on a passive substance. For Yeomans, the paradigm case of interaction is Newton’s third law, the equality of action and reaction (Yeomans 2012, 219, 221). Thus, we have two substances that are simultaneously active and passive: the “acting” substance is passive in relation to the “reacting” substance, just as the reacting, passive substance is active in relation to the acting one. Yeomans illustrates this point with a cue ball striking an 8 ball. The cue ball is active in that it causes the 8 ball to move; and it is passive in that it stops as a result of the collision. And parallel points hold for the 8 ball. So, he thinks, we have the separable cooccurrence of activity and passivity that Hegel is after in interaction. And yet this case does decompose into the co-occurrence of two one-way causal relations: the event of striking is the cooccurrence of the event of causing to move, a one way causal relation in which the cue ball is the active substance and the 8 ball the passive substance, and the event of causing to stop, a one way causal relation in which the 8 ball is the active substance and the cue ball the passive.

One might make a parallel objection in the case of recognition: to be free, I must recognize and be recognized as free. But these are just one-way acts of recognition that co-occur. We might hold that they must co-occur for either to occur at all (which is certainly also true where the law of the equality of action and reaction holds).[[6]](#footnote-6) But that is just another separate condition to add to our account: we need (1) A to recognize B as free; (2) B to recognize A as free; (3) and each act of recognition to be possible only where the other occurs. Such an account would not fall prey to the recognitional tag objection described above: however A and B got in the position in which they could recognize one another, they did not do so by some third party initiating them into the game by a 1-way act, because of condition (3).

So, why think that interaction and recognition must involve a reciprocal activity rather than two one-way activities that must co-occur? Here I can only offer textual considerations in favor of my view over what we can call “the tripartite analysis” of interaction and recognition.

In the case of interaction, Hegel discusses the kind of case Yeomans brings up in the sub-chapter prior to interaction (“Action and Reaction”). The kind of causality there described involves a causal relation between an active and a passive substance, much as Yeomans indicates. But Hegel notes that this casual activity is such that it does not return into itself: the 8 ball, once struck, is now in motion; it may strike the cue ball, but it might strike anything else as well. But with interaction the causal activity is “*bent*” (*umgebogen*), “turned back on itself” (6.237/11.407). It is such that “the effect no longer *goes over into another substance*” (6.237/11.407). The effect does not go over into another substance because the effect is no longer the cessation of the activity of the substance – in producing the effect, the interacting substance remains active. Or, as he also puts it, interacting substances are not just active and passive; they are substances “only in that they are the identity of the active and the passive” (6.238/11.408). A cue ball is active and then passive in striking the 8 ball, but its being a substance is not the result of its being active and passive – it remains the substance it is even as it ceases to strike the 8 ball.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the case of recognition, the first point I want to note is that if one accepts the textual evidence I presented in §1, the argument I have just given about interaction should be telling about how to understand recognition. The second point draws on Hegel’s claim that in knowing myself to be free I do not distinguish myself from others: I know myself to possess a self-consciousness that is shared or universal. This is the manifestation of the bending back upon itself characteristic of interaction. What I know, when I know the other to be free, returns back to me, in that what I know the other to be I know in knowing myself to be it too. According to the tripartite analysis, what I know of myself is the result of a one-way act of the other. True, on this analysis, in knowing myself to be free, I must also know the other to be free. But my knowledge of my freedom is not the same as my knowledge of the freedom of the other. What I know of myself I may also know of the other, and I may know it of myself only if I also know it of the other, but I do not know it of the other in knowing it of myself. Hence, I do not know it of myself in a universal way; in knowing it of myself, I *must* distinguish myself from the others (as distinct bearers of a common determination).

So, interaction and recognition are both reciprocal activities. In particular, the activity of each substance returns to itself. This means that the activity of each interacting substance and of each recognizing individual is itself common to all of the interacting substances and all of the recognizing individuals. It is not just common in the sense that it is generically the same, or different instances of the same type of activity; rather it is common in that it is the very same activity that is engaged in by each: what returns to one individual is also the activity of the other. This is a fairly difficult claim to understand, but it follows from the textual considerations noted so far. We will return to it in §4.

**§3 The Self-Reflecting Activity of Interaction and Recognition**

I turn now to further develop the nature of the activity present in both interaction and recognition. In the prior section, I drew on Hegel’s characterization of interaction to argue that an interacting substance is a substance only in being the identity of its activity and its passivity: the substance is not active in one respect and passive in another. This means that interaction is not a “becoming” but rather a “reflection into itself” (6.239).

Hegel’s terminology does not have much currency at present, but the distinction he is drawing is familiar. The basic point of the distinction can be conveyed through an example: striking an 8-ball (an event) and melting iron (a process) are activities such that they produce something and cease upon that production; by contrast, exercising magnetic attraction towards one another and living are such that they do not produce something and cease to be upon that production. Even as two magnets are stuck together as firmly as you like, they do not cease to exert their force upon one another; and in living, I actively produce and sustain myself, but the product of that activity is the continuation of that activity rather than its cessation.

The former examples (of event and process) are “becoming” activities while the latter are self-reflective activities in that the former (if uninterrupted) terminate in a change in the state of affairs that brings the activity to an end, while the latter are reflected into themselves in that (if uninterrupted) their “termination” is their continued activity. A self-reflected activity may produce changes, but the changes it produces do not terminate the activity (unless the resulting change interrupts the activity).

Both interaction and recognition are self-reflecting activities. We can see this by considering further the results of the last section. There I argued that interaction and recognition are reciprocal activities such that they cannot be reduced to two one-way activities. Hegel notes in both cases (in different ways) that this means that there is a sense in which the activity brings itself about: where I recognize you, my activity is a “result” of my recognition of you, as I can only recognize you in your recognizing me which you can only do in my recognizing you. So, my recognition of you is a “condition” on my recognition of you. And, similarly, where one substance is active and passive in relation to another, that substance is active in this manner only as a result of the activity of the other substance which is itself a result of the activity of the first substance. So, the activity in interaction is a condition on itself. This, however, can make no sense if the activity in question is a becoming: a becoming cannot be a condition on itself; the result of a becoming terminates it and does not initiate it.

A becoming of the same type can be a condition on another becoming of that type, as the heating of a space might cause one thermostat to trigger the cooling of that space which in turn triggers another thermostat to heat the space once more. There a heating is the cause of a heating. But the first heating is not the same becoming as the second heating.

But a self-reflecting activity can be a condition on itself. For example, a living being sustains itself by being a living being; thus a living being is a result of itself. A self-reflecting activity can be a condition on itself because it perpetuates itself, where it is the very same activity that endures. Hence its actuality can be a result of its actuality. So, interaction and recognition are self-reflecting activities.

That interaction and recognition are self-reflecting activities has significant implications for how to understand each. It means, for instance, that Hegel thinks of freedom as itself a social status, rather than a status that is (merely) the result of social processes.[[8]](#footnote-8) But what is most salient for our purposes is the implication for interaction: interaction is not as such purposive, and yet it is self-reflecting.[[9]](#footnote-9) That is, Hegel thinks there are non-purposive activities that perpetuate themselves. He makes the point that interacting substances are not purposive by saying they are “blind” to one another (6.251/12.15). This point will be of use to us in the next section, when I turn to consider the argument for the transition from interaction to freedom.

**§4 The Transition from Necessity to Freedom**

So far, I have built the case that interaction and recognition are understood by Hegel to be closely connected with one another. In particular, they share the abstract structure of being reciprocal self-reflecting activities. In this section, I will use that result to help unpack Hegel’s argument for the transition from interaction to the concept, or from necessity to freedom. As he himself notes, this is the “most difficult” transition in the *Logic*, and any light that can be shed on it would be significant (EL §159 Remark).

I will start by taking for granted that we have arrived at interaction as the final form of the *Essence Logic*, the highest form of necessity without freedom. Interaction leads to freedom, Hegel notes, because in interaction there is a contradiction that arises from the fact that the interacting substances are substances only in virtue of the interaction that is common to them all. There is an “*immediate identity*” of each substance with every other substance, in that each is the substance it is in virtue of the very same activity (6.239). And yet, as substances, they are independent of one another. That is “the absolute contradiction” (6.239), as Hegel puts it. Or: “Necessity is in this manner *the inner identity*; causality is the manifestation of necessity wherein its Schein *of being substantially other* [*des substantiellen Anderseins*] has sublated itself and necessity is raised to *freedom*” (6.238-9).

The necessity in interaction is the reciprocal determination of each substance by each substance. But this is more than just a determination of substances – it is that which makes them substances. *And* it is common to all of the substances that stand in interaction with one another – the activity in and of one substance is the same as the activity in and of the others. As noted in §2, this identity is not just a generic identity – it is not just that each substance is engaged in the same kind of activity. Each substance is engaged in the same activity in the sense that the activity of the one substance is inseparable from the activity of the others. And, as we have seen, this inseparability goes deeper than the inseparability of action and reaction: where there is action and reaction, what each substance does is different, so that we can decompose that kind of causality into the co-occurrence of two one-way causal relations. But that is not so for interaction. And so we cannot say that each substance does something different: each substance does the very same thing. But they are different substances. And that is an “absolute contradiction.”

We do not need to foreground the sense in which this is a contradiction to see what Hegel is saying. His point is that interaction must involve a manifold of substances, or individuals, and does not provide the conceptual resources by means of which those individuals can be stably differentiated from one another. Or, from the other side, interaction involves a unity of causal activity, necessity, but does not provide the conceptual resources by means of which that unity can be stably determined as the unity of a manifold of causal relata.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consider again the case of gravitational relations. A manifold of planets moving in relation to one another are the substances they are in virtue of the activity that they share with those substances that they are not (for Hegel, this activity constitutes the substantiality of matter – see note 5). We can individuate Venus and Mercury, of course: a great deal of space separates them. But separation in space is an accident, and not sufficient to distinguish them as substances – just imagine some massive being pushing them together. Really, each is just matter, and matter is not a count noun. And yet, on Hegel’s view, matter is only what it is by interacting with other matter and so being in motion. So, though matter is not a count noun, matter must be differentiated into distinct loci of causal activity. In interaction, we lack the resources to stably differentiate and connect the interacting substances to one another.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Having outlined the conceptual impasse within interaction, the natural question to ask is how freedom helps us emerge from it. For that, I will turn to recognition, as a kind of interaction that contains a solution to the problem by providing the conceptual resources requisite to individuate the interacting self-consciousnesses.

Recall that, for Hegel, a self-consciousness recognizes another in knowledge, and is free in knowing itself to be free (see the discussion in §2). I know myself to be free in knowing you to be free, and my knowledge of myself as free is my knowledge of my identity with you. We are free. This does not merely mean we share a generic feature in common, for my freedom is inseparable from your freedom in the sense that my recognition of you is your recognition of me. This is an activity that sustains us each as free, and it is the same activity, and so our freedom is the same.

It would appear, then, that in the case of recognition there should also be a contradiction: viz., you and I cannot be stably differentiated from one another, if we are both what we are (free) through the same activity. What makes me different from you? Again, we might appeal to the fact that my body is different from your body. I doubt that is an accident, but it is not clear why there can’t be some hive mind present in each of our bodies. And if that is at least apparently possible, then what conceptual resources permit us to distinguish between you and I?

Hegel says: the identity that obtains between you and I, the fact that we do not distinguish ourselves from each other, occurs through the activity by which each of us negates our desire. Unlike Venus, I negate that which is immediate in me and thereby establish my identity with you as free, and you do the same. But my desires are mine and not yours, and even though I negate them, that negation is present in my identifying with you as free. Thus, my knowledge stably contains a relation of me to you: we are the same, in that the very same activity makes us what we are, and yet we are different, in that that activity consists in negating that which differentiates us from one another.

In universal self-consciousness, the specific manner in which each differentiates itself from the others is by negating its desire. That would be out of place at the end of the *Essence Logic*. But what is not out of place is the logical notion of an individual determining itself to be the same as another individual by means of negating that which differentiates it, in a reciprocal self-reflecting activity. And that negation of what differentiates it can only occur through the concept of itself. Or, as Hegel puts it, “the substantiality of the sides standing in relations is lost, and necessity unveils itself. Necessity does not become freedom by disappearing but rather by the still only *inner* identity being *manifested”* (6.239). That is, the identity of each interacting substance is merely inner, in the necessity characterizing the relations between the substances. What makes the interacting substances substances is the same, but that is not manifested or actual as a substance – it is only in the relation between the different substances, and not posited as their substantiality. There is a veil over this necessity – the substances are through this necessity, but they cannot see what they are doing. The necessity must come into the light of day, it must be posited or manifested. To do that would be for the substances to posit their activity; that activity is what makes them substances, and so to posit it is to posit themselves. To act in the light provided by one’s concept is to act freely. So, to cast aside the veil that hides necessity is to manifest that necessity in freedom.

That does not happen in interaction: the interacting substances are blind, they do not sublate their differences but remain distinct from one another. To sublate their differences they must not only determine themselves in a self-reflecting activity; they must determine themselves through their concept. The concept of each is the same, and so in acting through their concept they must in some manner negate that which differentiates them from one another. Only thus can the interacting manifold be genuinely different from one another and the same: they are the same through negating their differences, a negation that can only occur through freedom.

The result is freedom in the sense that it is a kind of self-reflecting activity that occurs through the concept of itself. This activity will be purposive in that it will be done in light of a logically prior representation of its concept, through or by means of the concept the reality of which is perpetuated in the activity. That which is active in this sense does not merely determine itself by means of interaction (in which it is blind to itself), but determines itself through the concept of what it is. Hegel’s thought is that necessity itself requires this, in that the reciprocal causal activity of substances cannot be without reciprocal purposive activity also being.

**§5 The Substantiality of Ethical Life**

Now for my final point: how can we reconcile Hegel’s insistence on the importance and centrality of freedom to modern life and his claim that individuals are accidents of the ethical community? Here is a particularly striking formulation of the two apparently incompatible views in close sequence:

“Ethical life is the *Idea of freedom* as the living good which has its knowledge and volition in self-consciousness, and its actuality through self-conscious action” (Hegel 1991, §142; Nisbet translation)

“[T]he ethical sphere is freedom, or the will which has being in and for itself as objectivity, as a circle of necessity whose moments are the *ethical powers* which govern the lives of individuals. In these individuals – who are accidental to them – these powers have their representation, appearing shape, and actuality” (Hegel 1991, §145; Nisbet translation).

By this point, we should not be surprised to see essence logical categories (substance, appearing, power, even actuality) used to describe freedom. But it is still surprising that Hegel characterizes those individuals as “accidents.” That, we might have thought, is precisely what they are not, as they engage in a self-reflecting activity that occurs through their concept.

But we can make sense of his claim, and square it with his insistence on the fact that ethical life is freedom through the knowledge and action of self-conscious individuals, by reflecting on what we have learned about the self-reflecting activity characteristic of interaction. In that activity, the substances are “accidents” in the sense that it is accidental what qualifies as a substance in this arena: there is no way stably to individuate the substances, and whether Mars and Venus are one substance or two is an accident of space. As we saw, that was an “absolute contradiction,” or anyway created a conceptual instability, as interaction makes sense only where there are multiple substances that can be individuated as substances, and an accident is not a substance.

In the surprising passage about individuals, Hegel is making the same point. The “ethical powers” (the family, civil society, the state, etc.) are the “realm of necessity.” Within ethical life, the recognition relations that sustain the freedom of individuals are recognition relations between self-conscious individuals that are now mediated by the system of necessity articulated into ethical powers. So, the reciprocal self-reflective recognitive activity has as its determinations conceptual content that comes from these powers. Given the account from interaction that we have developed, it follows that these powers are or exist in the recognitive activity of the individuals. And so the differences between the individuals, their individuality, are accidental.

But we know, at this point, that recognitive relations differ from mere interaction in that recognitive activity occurs through the concept of that which is active. And so the individuals that engage in the recognitive relations are not accidents in the way of Mars and Venus. Rather, we can say, they start off as accidents in relation to the ethical powers, but they – unlike Mars and Venus – have as their task the negation of that which makes them accidental through the positing of themselves as free in the ethical powers.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Initially, I start out as an accident in relation to the substantial form of necessity that presents itself to me as a power. I am, to be sure, shaped and informed by that power: my family has taught me what little I know. But I do not initially regard this as my concept; I am originally gripped by desires that appear to be merely mine, and worth pursuing for all of that. It is only by negating those desires and recognizing my will as having validity in and through my recognitive activity of the validity of the ethical powers that I cease to be an accident, and that I become free. This does not entail that I must conform to the ethical powers. For whatever validity the ethical powers have must be validity for me, or validity that occurs through my recognition of them. (An ethical power that does not appear is nothing at all; and ethical powers appear to self-conscious individuals in their act of recognizing them.) It *does* entail that my freedom, at least as it is possibly actualized in ethical life, is a freedom that must engage in acts of attempting to validate (through reform, revolution, or endorsement) the ethical powers.

That will be too “communitarian” or “conservative” for many, but I think it does justice to Hegel’s thought in calling us accidents in a way that squares that claim with his emphasis on freedom (as he understands it, of course), and it does so by situating these concepts in relation to his *Logic*.

In this article, I have argued that Hegel drew close connections between interaction and recognition, and that attention to those connections can illuminate each topic, in particular clarifying Hegel’s argument that necessity unveils itself as freedom and his claim that individuals are accidents of ethical powers.

A more general hope that I have for the project is that it makes the case that we should read Hegel’s *Logic* and his real philosophy in tandem with one another. I do not think that Hegel’s *Logic* contains the cipher by means of which we can understand his real philosophy – for one thing, the *Logic* itself requires a cipher. Rather, they can and ought to be read together, so that we can mutually illuminate them. To do that we have to be alive to the ways in which Hegel uses his logical vocabulary in the real philosophy. As has frequently been noted, and is frequently lamented, Hegel does not discuss recognition in the *Logic*. But that does not mean that recognition is not significant for understanding the *Logic*, nor does it mean that the *Logic* is useless for clarifying recognition. In fact, if we look at Hegel’s discussions of recognition, we see that he uses logical vocabulary from the end of the *Essence Logic* to characterize it. Why? It has been my general experience that wherever this terminological overlap occurs, we can come to understand both the relevant parts of the *Logic* *and* the real philosophy better by answering that question.

Much more could be learned by reflecting on the connection that Hegel draws between interaction and recognition. But I must conclude.

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1. I cite Hegel’s texts wherever possible according to section number; where that is not possible, I cite according to the Surhkamp edition followed by a ‘/’ followed by the pagination in the Felix Meiner edition. Translations from Hegel are my own unless otherwise noted, though I have consulted the English translations cited in the bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. So some have said Hegel’s political philosophy is overly organicist, undermining the freedom of the individual by viewing individuals as mere moments of a larger whole (Theunissen 1978; 2002; Habermas 1987, 29–30). What I will say to solve the textual puzzle I present will not, I am sure, satisfy these critics (as it will involve a closer connection between the individual and the ethical powers than they would want), but I hope it will make plain how Hegel understands his project. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Consider also his more general deduction of the category of interaction in the *Grundlage* (Fichte 1971, 276–82). The I is influenced by the not-I. Since the I posits itself, or is absolutely spontaneous, that influence cannot come from something foreign; it must be a result, rather, of the activity of the I, and so the I must stand in interaction with itself. Fichte does not here say that the interaction of the I with itself becomes the relation of mutual recognition, but the thought seems to lurk under the surface. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Gravity involves much more than is present in interaction: most obviously, gravitational relations involve space and time, and neither figures in the *Logic*; less obviously, but no less importantly, gravitational relations involve matter, and matter involves mechanical explanations of wholes by appeal to their parts. I will not be appealing to that aspect of the case in what follows; for the best account of Hegel’s logical treatment of this, see (Kreines 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hegel thinks that gravity “constitutes the substantiality of matter, and is the striving after the *middle point*, which, however, essentially falls *outside of it*” (PN §262 Remark). Matter as such is manifold (this is how Hegel makes sense of the idea of repulsion), and is what it is in moving towards the middle point between it and other matter. But this moving cannot stop: the middle point is determined in relation to other matter, and there is always yet other matter and so never a fixed middle point which would permit the matter to stop moving. That the middle point is relative to all other matter means that all matter is in interaction: each moves towards each in a manner that is determined by the motion of each.

   This may or may not be an accurate account of gravity – that does not matter for our purposes. What matters is that this theory of gravity serves as a helpful illustration of interaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. On this point, consider Tarde’s sociological account of the reciprocal nature of society: the “reciprocal possession” of one person by another that constitutes society is one in which each person is slave and master at the same time (Tarde 2012, 51). The interaction is in a sense reciprocal, but it is the reciprocity of action and reaction. This follows from Tarde’s thought that the differences between what interacts are primary (Tarde 2012, 40ff.), a thought that was very influential to Deleuze’s version of the idea that interaction is at play in both minded and non-minded phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ng makes a similar case that interaction contains an advance over action and reaction (see Ng 2020, 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on this, see (Pippin 2008, 194ff; 2007, 424–27; Pinkard 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here I depart from Ng’s account of interaction. Drawing on Schelling’s organic understanding of interaction, she argues that Hegel’s concept of interaction is already purposive (see Ng 2020, 150–51, 156–64). I do not have the space to consider her arguments in the detail they deserve. Importantly, I do not disagree with the spirit of her discussion: I think she is right that what ultimately happens is an appeal to purposive self-reflecting activity, and that that is a result of reflections on the limitations of the necessity of causal relations. My only objection is that she is missing a step: that there is a step to be taken from interaction to purpose, a step that needs to be justified if Hegel’s deduction of freedom from necessity is going to be convincing. For further evidence of this, see EL §§154 Remark and 156z; I am also taking seriously the parallel between Hegel’s account and Kant’s Analogies, and I think Hegel would have recognized that there is logical space for a 3rd Analogy that is not purposive. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For the formulations of this paragraph I would especially like to thank Jim Kreines, who encouraged me to think about the end of the *Essence Logic* in terms of issues around individuation, and Chris Yeomans, who pressed upon me the fact that it is not obvious whether there are one or many substances in interaction with one another. (On my reading, there are many substances, but they share that activity which makes them substances.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I find it interesting to connect this point to a point that Butler makes about human bodies: she argues that we cannot think of people as substances because, as embodied, they are radically vulnerable in a way that undoes their “discrete boundaries” (Butler 2020, 49). Hegel sees this undoing as already present in the interaction of non-living, material substances, and regards recognition as a way of navigating it (undoubtedly more happily than is deemed possible by Butler). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Here is how he puts the point in the *Encyclopedia* account of ethical life: “The *free* self knowing *substance*, in which the absolute *should* is just as much *being*, has actuality as [the] spirit of a *people* [*Volkes*]. The abstract diremption of this spirit is the separation *into different people* [*in Personen*], of whose independence it is the inner power and necessity. However, the person, as thinking intelligence, knows that substance as its own nature [Wesen], ceases in this disposition to be the accident of the same…” (Enc §514). What Hegel makes explicit here, but leaves implicit in his treatment of the same topic in the *Philosophy of Right*, is that the self-conscious individual is the kind of accident that *ceases to be* an accident through acting in light of its concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)