Structure and Struggle: A New Reading of The Master and Slave Dialectic

A. Introduction

Ever since Alexandre Kojève presented the master-slave dialectic as introduction and key to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit[[1]](#footnote-1), it has remained the focal point of much scholarly debate.[[2]](#footnote-2)

While diverse readings of the dialectic and controversies over the interpretation of specific issues abound, there is one major feature upon which there seems to be near consensus: namely, that the life and death struggle referred to by Hegel as a decisive experience for the realization of self-consciousness as free, independent, and self-determining, involves two individuals engaged in a direct conflict in which the stakes are the highest possible. I shall call this widely accepted reading the “duel view” of the struggle.[[3]](#footnote-3) This view is subject to virtually no critical examination with the single exception of an attempt by John McDowell to interpret the dialectic as involving not two individuals, but rather a single protagonist whose struggle is an internal affair. [[4]](#footnote-4)

The aim of the present paper is to develop an alternative to the duel view, according to which the master-slave dialectic is to be understood as depicting self-consciousness’ own struggle to overcome its dependence upon external objects, and its need for recognition for such overcoming from another self-consciousness engaged in a struggle of the very same kind. According to the view developed here, we should read the life and death struggle as a double solitary struggle. The experience of self-consciousness does involve two individuals, yet they are not combatting each other. Instead, each of them goes through a solitary trial, an individual struggle that is supposed to demonstrate each’s independence in relation to external objects and to life in general. It is with regard to such a struggle that each needs the other’s recognition of her achievement. To illustrate, each of them has her own dragon to slay but the ultimate goal is not just to slay the dragon but to receive the other’s recognition for doing that. The ultimately different statuses of the two (master and slave) are not a direct consequence of a combative interaction between them as suggested by the duel view. Rather, their statuses are determined by their respective acknowledgments of the outcomes of each separate solitary struggle. The hierarchy of master and slave is constituted by A’s acknowledgement of B’s success and B’s registration of A’s failure. This situation ushers in the dialectics of master and slave which is the failure of achieving mutual recognition, hence the failure of both to realize themselves fully as self-consciousnesses. As I shall argue, what limits self-consciousness from being fully realized is immanent to the structure of self-consciousness. Therefore, the struggle and the motivation in which it is grounded should be explained on the basis of the dynamics determined by that structure.

The double solitary struggle view offers an alternative to any reading of the dialectic which endorses the duel view of the struggle. This includes the currently dominant pragmatic-normative interpretation advocated, in different ways, by Pinkard, Pippin and Brandom, which presents the struggle as being over the constitution of norms for knowledge and action;[[5]](#footnote-5) and the once dominant but still very influential historical-political reading of Kojève,[[6]](#footnote-6) as well as other readings of the text that run into difficulties when they try to accommodate the duel view to their overall interpretation of the section and its central concepts.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the next section I show the near consensus the duel view enjoys, expressed across the abovementioned different interpretive approaches. Highlighting the interpretive difficulties these different approaches share with regard to the struggle allows me to indicate the requirements that must be satisfied in any cogent interpretation of it. In sections C-E, I present the double solitary struggle view and its advantages in providing such a cogent interpretation.

B. The Duel View

For Kojève the struggle has a central place as an experience that distinguishes acting based upon human desire, characteristic of self-consciousness, from acting upon animal desire, which characterizes consciousness.[[8]](#footnote-8) Human desire, contrary to animal desire, yields action that seeks to subjugate another desire. In case human desire is directed towards a thing, it should not be understood as a desire “to possess the thing as to make another recognize his right… to that thing, to make another recognize him as an owner of the thing.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The subjugation of another desire for the purpose of winning recognition leads to a life and death fight between such desiring subjects. A fight against another subject is necessary because recognition can be gained only when one puts the satisfaction of his nonbiological desire above his biological existence: such a show of willingness to die in order to transcend the given is rewarded with recognition, an attitude which, according to Kojève, reflects the human character of this particular kind of desire. The fight and the motivation for it are to be understood as follows: the adversaries must display their willingness to go all the way in their attempt to destroy one another while risking their lives for the purpose of winning recognition which Kojève equates with pure prestige. The outcome, though, must be such that both stay alive, because if the victor kills the vanquished, he will fail to accomplish his goal: forcing the other to recognize him as master. Kojève’s view of the struggle involves several features: singling out a special kind of desire as transcending the given, the satisfaction of which both motivates a search for a fight with another in order to negate him and requires the recognition of the victor’s superiority by the adversary. Gaining victory in the struggle is a condition for the realization of one as self-consciousness, understood as “transcendence of self with respect to self as given”.[[10]](#footnote-10) For Kojève, then, the struggle is intrinsic to the possibility of becoming self-consciousness, or being entitled to think of oneself as such: one cannot become self-consciousness without really being willing to risk his life: one either risks his life, his “self as given”, for the sake of transcending it and being recognized by his adversary for that, or one remains within the realm of the given, thus failing to become self-consciousness. This outcome constitutes a hierarchy according to which the latter is subjugated by the former and correspondingly recognition is only one-sided.

Kojève uses the terms ‘master’ and ‘slave’ in the singular yet concedes that his framing dictates a continuous struggle that involves at least one victor and many vanquished. The fight is one in which “each will want to subjugate the other, all the others, by a negating, destroying action”[[11]](#footnote-11), hence it involves at least two protagonists, but more reasonably multiple protagonists who challenge each other in order to gain prestige. Kojève’s view of the struggle for recognition, then, is one of an actual historical warring situation between two or more parties that are motivated by the prestige that they might gain as a result and the subjugation of the desire of others.[[12]](#footnote-12) As we shall see later, Kojève’s view of the motivation for engaging in the struggle and its being continuous and multiple runs into difficulties.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In spite of the differences between their accounts of the chapter on self-consciousness, Pippin, Pinkard and Brandom share a common pragmatic-normative approach according to which the achievement of self-consciousness is the establishment of norms for knowledge and action within the social realm. In other words, they share the view that the fourth chapter of the Phenomenology puts forth an argument regarding the social nature of knowledge: the standards for what is practically and epistemologically normative are the outcome of a process that takes place within a community.[[14]](#footnote-14) The duel view of the struggle remains intact even when we shift from Kojève’s historical-political interpretation to the pragmatic-normative one: according to this position, the struggle is over the authority of each of the opponents to be the one that constitutes the way things should be taken.[[15]](#footnote-15) Each demands to be recognized by the other as having that status, demonstrating thereby her superiority over the other and her independence. The struggle, according to the pragmatic-normative view then, is an irreconcilable conflict between two individuals who set out to force each other to accept her respective point of view by recognizing it as the authoritative one.[[16]](#footnote-16)

While keeping with the duel-like character of the struggle, the pragmatic-normative interpretation runs into difficulties when it comes to the role of the struggle within Hegel’s overall argument. For the historical-political interpretation the struggle is the cornerstone of social and political arrangements and the fundamental mode of action within these realms, while from the pragmatic-normative perspective Hegel’s insistence on a life and death struggle becomes a hermeneutical challenge and is somewhat perceived as a peculiarity of 19th century German idealist extravagance. The reason for that is that contrary to Kojève, the stakes that are at play in the pragmatic-normative position are hardly of the kind that justify a life and death struggle. Thus, for Brandom who understands the distinctive trait of self-consciousness as consisting in self-constitution through self-identification, the struggle is a “metonymic image” that is meant to convey the idea that the kind of identification that is at stake is such that one is willing to risk his life for it. One commits oneself to something which is beyond biological life showing that life is not “an essential element of the self one is thereby constituting”.[[17]](#footnote-17) Brandom refers to the samurai code of Bushido as an extreme example of such a commitment. Thus, he seems to identify one’s willingness to sacrifice his life with one’s demonstrating that an essential element of his self is independent from life. Yet, the Hegelian holding life of no account is supposed to negate life tout court, not to ensure the survival of others, a specific institution or certain values, important as they might be. From a Hegelian perspective, then, the samurai is not as extreme an example as it might have seemed. Furthermore, thinking of the struggle as metonymic means that Hegel’s point should be interpreted broadly: the idea is that being committed amounts to one’s readiness to sacrifice one commitment for the sake of demonstrating one’s self-identification with another commitment. Such acts of self-identification do not necessarily involve “such large-scale, wholesale affairs” as a willingness to sacrifice one’s life; sacrificing one’s job for a moral or a political principle is just as self-constituting as risking one’s life.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, the struggle is rendered the extreme and exaggerated representative of a broader array of mostly mundane experiences rather than being regarded as constitutive for self-consciousness’ self-realization.

Pippin admits that Brandom’s view of the struggle is incompatible with Hegel’s due to the role of the struggle as “a key element in the story itself, not as an exemplification of a larger story,”[[19]](#footnote-19) and attempts to provide an account of his own that will justify its centrality. Pippin agrees with Brandom that being a self-consciousness means identifying oneself with commitments, as the way one takes herself constitutes what she is in and for itself.[[20]](#footnote-20) But the fact that others exist and have commitments of their own leads inevitably to a conflict that “forces on one the nature of one’s attachment to life.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This forced evaluation of one’s attachment to life puts the individuals engaged in the struggle in a situation where they must choose between surrendering and sacrificing their commitments for the sake of mere life or holding fast to their commitments and transcending their dependency upon mere life. Thus, argues Pippin, life becomes a value rather than a biological fact. For Pippin, then, the struggle is an inevitability that follows from the fact that there is more than one desiring subject. The role of recognition in the struggle, however, remains obscure: sooner or later one will engage in a conflict with other individuals over opposing commitments and will have to decide whether she surrenders or fights. But then there is no sense in talking about a motivation to seek recognition by engaging in a struggle; rather, the struggle is a consequence of a fact about the world, namely, the existence of a plurality of subjects and their conflicting commitments, and not a consequence of a movement that is immanent to self-consciousness.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Pippin’s attempt to defend the Hegelian struggle in its extreme sense does not mean that he does not have qualms of his own about the whole idea. In an earlier work he offers the following insight: suppose that Hegel’s idea is that freedom in the sense of practical rationality is conditioned by a willingness to risk one’s life through a demonstration of indifference to one’s natural life, which is supposed to prove one’s self-determination and independence from life. Then, we would have to be warranted in attributing the relevant motivation to someone who engages in a struggle to the death. Yet, such a willingness to die, Pippin argues, does not necessarily attest to freedom as self-determination: “I might be willing to take that risk only because some other natural desire, including perhaps a lust for honor and power, or a biological attachment to my family, is so overwhelming that I cannot resist it”.[[23]](#footnote-23) Pippin rightly emphasizes the question of the motivation that pushes one to engage in a struggle. One can enter into a struggle that puts one’s life at risk for many reasons, most of which are not relevant to the point that is supposed to be proven according to Hegel.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Pippin’s critical remark points to a problem in the pragmatic-normative approach: it is a common assumption among the proponents of this view that the subject is a reason-responsive rational agent on the one hand, yet on the other, “there is no way to assume some common commitment (or natural interest, or objective goal, or obvious eudaimonia) on the part of the struggling parties that would prevent a hypothetical struggle to the death”.[[25]](#footnote-25) First, it seems strange that both subjects that are supposed to engage in a struggle are characterized the way they are but are left with the inevitable fate of struggling against each other to the death over their opposing commitments. Even Hobbesian subjects living in the state of nature succeed in coming together to sign a social contract.[[26]](#footnote-26) Second, it is not clear how this setting expresses the kind of indifference to life that amounts to independence and self-determination. Indeed, a struggle to the death under these circumstances seems artificial and thus appears as a hermeneutical challenge.

This challenge, however, is not limited to the pragmatic-normative interpretation. Houlgate who subscribes neither to the historical-political nor to the pragmatic-normative interpretation rejects the idea that the struggle is constitutive of self-consciousness in general and argues that it should be understood as limited to a particular kind of self-consciousness, a “primitive” one.[[27]](#footnote-27) Primitive self-consciousness characterizes a subject who fails to comprehend the cooperative nature of recognition which implies mutuality and instead acts upon his desire for recognition by the other in the following manner: “it wants the other to see that it is trying to kill the other and risking its own life in so doing.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Primitive self-consciousness seeks recognition from another whom he wants to kill at the same time, hence his desire for recognition is self-contradictory. Thus, Houlgate’s account limits the role of the struggle to the particular case of ‘primitive’ self-consciousness rather than being constitutive of the experience of every self-consciousness and the motivation attached to this particular kind of self-consciousness is self-contradictory. However, when the parties involved are fully developed self-consciousnesses they understand interaction as grounded in mutual recognition and therefore, a conflict never arises. The point of Houlgate’s account, then, is that the struggle is not inherent to social interaction but rather a failure on the part of actual historical self-consciousnesses “to understand properly what social interaction demands”. Yet, what is left unexplained by Houlgate is how and why we have found ourselves with two different kinds of self-consciousness.[[29]](#footnote-29) Even if we ignore the problem of two kinds of self-consciousness, the idea that the desire of primitive self-consciousness is so profoundly irrational seems inadequate to Hegel’s text. Engaging in a struggle should have made sense even if eventually it fails to deliver the intended outcome. Attributing a self-contradictory motivation to self-consciousness makes the struggle a symptom of a deficient self-consciousness rather than an instance that provides us with an insight into the dynamics of self-consciousness.

An exception to the supposedly self-evident reading of the struggle as a duel can be found in the ‘heterodox’ interpretation of John McDowell.[[30]](#footnote-30) McDowell rejects the view according to which Hegel is “arguing that there can be self-conscious individuals only in a mutually recognitive communities”.[[31]](#footnote-31) Instead, he argues that we should view the chapter on self-consciousness as concerned with an issue to which Kant was not able to give a satisfactory account, namely the “equipoise between subjective and objective”.[[32]](#footnote-32) The details of McDowell’s asocial reading with regard to the Kantian issue need not concern us here. What is important for our purposes is that for McDowell “only one biological individual is really in play”,[[33]](#footnote-33) and “the real topic is two aspects of the consciousness of a single individual, though at a stage at which that is not clear to the individual in question.”[[34]](#footnote-34) For McDowell, the struggle is an internal one where self-consciousness as an apperceptive I struggles to dispense with its other aspect of being an empirical subject immersed in life. The struggle to the death and its outcome, in which the former enslaves the latter, is an “allegorical expression” of self-consciousness’ forced acknowledgment that it cannot be independent from its empirical aspect. Yet, the allegory appears to refer to two individuals, if not in the struggle itself, then at least in the guise of master and slave as its outcome. Thus, McDowell suggests that we understand the apperceptive I as distinguishing itself from its empirical aspect to the extent that it sees in it a distinct consciousness that is in charge of dealing with the external objects from which self-consciousness wishes to affirm its independence. According to McDowell, then, the experience of self-consciousness leads necessarily to “pathological self-conceptions” where self-consciousness is struggling to deny its identity with the empirical subject which is its own self. Now, whether these are to be seen as “intelligible and instructive distortions in the search for self-understanding” as McDowell argues or as “outright delusions” as he claims Houlgate criticizes him for, is another issue.[[35]](#footnote-35) What is clear is that interpreting the protagonist of the struggle as being in such a pathological state of denying an aspect of her own self and misidentifying it as another individual is indeed a difficult hermeneutical position to be in. This position is born out of the gap between an interpretation that could do without a struggle and the constraint imposed on the interpretation by the centrality of the struggle in Hegel’s text.

We can now sum up the difficulties in the existing interpretations of the struggle and list the requirements that should be satisfied by an interpretation that is adequate to the pivotal role of the struggle in the master-slave dialectic.

The first difficulty is providing an account for why there are only two protagonists involved in Hegel’s scenario. Thus, duel view interpretations see the victor of the struggle as never exempt from her next struggle. As Kojève noted, subjugating one opponent, or two, is never enough, there are always more. Bringing one to acknowledge my authority over epistemological and practical norms is also a recurring situation. For the duel view, the social field is a battlefield. Yet Hegel does not depict an ongoing social or political constant situation in which the many are involved. Rather, he presents the master and the slave as two figures who illustrate the duality that is characteristic of self-consciousness and determines its attempt at self-realization.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The second difficulty regards the motivation to engage in the struggle. It has several aspects: the first is whether the motivation originates internally or is responsive to an external being. If what motivates the subject is grounded in the existence of others, then the motivation is external, while being motivated internally means that the subject is set to achieve its own goal for which the other might turn out to be indispensable. The duel view is quite ambiguous with regard to the origin of the subject’s motivation. Does she seek a struggle for her own reasons, or in response to a threat posed by others to the possibility of satisfying her desires? Another aspect of this second difficulty is the symmetry of motivations: It seems that from the duel view’s perspective there is a distinction between the two antagonists: one initiates the struggle while the other reacts to the challenge in one way or another. Yet, suggesting an asymmetrical relation between the two antagonists as the premise of the struggle is in contrast with Hegel’s text.[[37]](#footnote-37) The final aspect of the question of motivation is the disproportionality between the motivation that leads to the engagement according to different versions of the duel view, and Hegel’s insistence upon a struggle to the death. It is no wonder that the duel view passes rapidly from a struggle to the death to a struggle over some kind of domination; the latter is better suited to the various motivations offered by duel view interpretations. The motivational structures of these two kinds of struggles are different.[[38]](#footnote-38) Yet Hegel refers only to one kind of struggle for recognition – a struggle to the death. The question we must ask, then, is how a struggle to the death ends up as a hierarchical relation between master and slave if it was indeed a struggle to the death.

Third, the duel view fails to explain the special status of the hierarchical relation of master and slave as the outcome of the struggle. Other outcomes are equally possible: one might eventually kill the other or be killed by him, or they can decide to negotiate and reach a compromise; and of course, there is the possibility that nobody wins, and they have an ongoing struggle that never really ends. Yet, Hegel is exclusively interested in one outcome and this must be accounted for. As I will argue, the account can be given in terms of the structure of self-consciousness.

Finally, as McDowell notes, the duel view is unclear as to how the struggle with another provides a way out of the initial problem self-consciousness has with external objects.[[39]](#footnote-39)

These are, then, the requirements that must be satisfied in order to account for the struggle that Hegel discusses in the Phenomenology: First, it must involve two individuals who are mutually related, and it is the nature of this relation that must be explained. Second, the motivation to engage in a struggle should be internal to the structure of self-consciousness. This structure should clarify the sense in which a death challenge is a condition for self-consciousness’ independence and why putting its life at risk leads to a hierarchy between master and slave. Third, this master and slave relation must be accounted for as a necessary outcome from the perspective of self-consciousness and not as one possible outcome among others that Hegel happens to focus upon. Finally, the struggle must resolve the initial problem of self-consciousness with regard to external objects.

The double solitary struggle view which I present in the remainder of this article satisfies these requirements: it involves two self-consciousnesses that attempt, each on its own, to achieve independence vis-à-vis external objects and to be recognized for that achievement by the other self-consciousness. Their motivation to do so is immanent to their structure: self-consciousness strives to determine itself as its own object and thereby achieve unity. Yet, still being consciousness, self-consciousness’ challenge is its determination by external objects. Thus, the two individuals who engage in their separate struggles embody the two aspects of self-consciousness and the manner in which they relate to each other. This view then, reclaims the centrality of the struggle by interpreting its nature anew and demonstrating the necessity of the outcome from the perspective of self-consciousness’ dual relation to itself on the one hand, and to objects on another, and finally, with regard to another self-consciousness.

In the following sections I present a reading that supports this double solitary struggle view. In section C I discuss the group of paragraphs that serve as an introduction to the chapter on self-consciousness (§166-§177). These paragraphs analyze the structure of self-consciousness that determines the movement of the self-realization of self-consciousness and the challenges it faces in its relation to external objects and to another self-consciousness. In section D I discuss the first group of paragraphs of “Independence and Dependence” (§178-§185). In these paragraphs Hegel elaborates the “pure notion of recognition” which provides a view to the dialectical movement of the encounter between two self-consciousnesses without the complication brought by the existence of external objects. Finally, in section E, I discuss the last group of paragraphs (§186-§196) that elaborates self-consciousness’ experience of its dialectical movement which consists in a relation both to objects and to another self-consciousness.

C. self-consciousness and its object

The introductory paragraphs of the self-consciousness chapter lay out the structure of self-consciousness, setting its task and determining the conditions for its realization, through a description of the dynamics that this very structure dictates. Self-consciousness is a new phase of consciousness that presents a “new shape of knowing, the knowing of itself” (§166). It sets itself the task of achieving “the identity of itself with itself” (§167) which amounts to having itself as its own exclusive object. This task is a challenge for self-consciousness because as Hegel argues, “Consciousness as self-consciousness… has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception… and the second… itself…” (§167). The problem is that the former is a medium through which self-consciousness tries to reach the latter. Self-consciousness, then, cannot unite with itself immediately but only through the medium of another object. Already at the end of the preceding chapter on “Force and the Understanding” Hegel argues that “the reason why ‘explaining’ affords so much self-satisfaction is just because in it consciousness is, so to speak, communing directly with itself, enjoying only itself: although it seems to be busy with something else, it is in fact occupied only with itself” (§163). Hegel goes on to explain that the new shape of consciousness consists in the passage from previous shapes of consciousness that had the Thing as their truth to having self-consciousness as its own truth. However, this is not yet explicit for consciousness but only for us, the readers of the phenomenology (§164). Self-consciousness, then, is pushed by its structure to seek unity with itself, to determine itself, while it is determined by external objects, a state which prevents it from affirming its independence and achieving unity with itself.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Overcoming its dependence upon the object becomes, then, a crucial step in uniting with itself. To illustrate, eating apples is not just about satisfying one’s hunger; its significance lies in the act of consumption as expressing self-consciousness’ negation of anything that interferes with its attempt at unity. However, this approach does not provide the expected results, as the affirmation of self-consciousness’ independence turns out to be dependent upon the reappearance of the object: “thus, self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and desire as well” (§175). Eating apples is a repetitive procedure that makes manifest the extent to which self-consciousness’ self-relation is dependent upon the object instead of affirming its independence. Yet, even if self-consciousness could find a way to overcome its dependence upon objects it would still find that the immediate relation to itself, the unity of itself both as subject and as object, is merely confined to its inner world. Being “a new shape of knowing” it must nevertheless preserve a knowing relation that contains otherness, or externality. If it aims to know itself as its sole object, this knowledge must be mediated.

Thus, it turns out that self-consciousness’ task of relating to itself actually consists of two challenges: first, overcoming its dependence upon objects, and second, finding a substitute that can occupy its place in the constitution of its relation to itself, rendering the mediation of its relation to itself possible. Another self-consciousness, i.e., an object that manifests the same negativity towards objects, is precisely the source of affirmation sought after: each self-consciousness would reflect to the other, as in a mirror, its negativity towards everything which is other than itself, thus enabling affirmation of both self-consciousnesses’ independence. This is the meaning of Hegel’s claim that self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness (§175). All this shows the level of acrobatics that is required from self-consciousness in its movement towards self-realization: it must overcome externality while being externally acknowledged to have done so.

Yet, this does not resolve self-consciousness’ dependence upon objects: the satisfaction self-consciousness can achieve in another self-consciousness is a reflection of its negative relation towards external objects; but this relation must first be demonstrated to the other self-consciousness. A recognition by another self-consciousness can be given only after self-consciousness has done something to demonstrate its independence vis-à-vis external objects and, more comprehensively, life.[[41]](#footnote-41) This is where self-consciousness must take a more radical step than the preceding one of repeatedly consuming objects: it must challenge its ties to the whole expanse of the sensible world by a single act that bears upon all objects at once rather than dealing with them serially. Self-consciousness’ ties to the sensible world are mediated through its own sensible existence, hence severing these ties in one single act means a negating of its own sensible existence, or the negating of itself.

The other self-consciousness, being an individual, is independent like every other object but instead of maintaining, by its obstinate existence, the dependence of the first self-consciousness it carves a path for the first’s independence by performing a self-negation of its own. Thus, each self-consciousness’ self-negation is a condition for a successful encounter of the two self-consciousnesses that yields recognition: “it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is” (§175).[[42]](#footnote-42)

Thus, the structure of self-consciousness determines its task and also the obstacles that await it. At first, self-consciousness must overcome its dependence upon objects through a comprehensive act and not an interminable procedure. The key to such an act is to be found in its negative attitude toward itself as an object. An act that is grounded in this self-negating attitude on the part of each self-consciousness is required for the possibility of self-realization. Only then both self-consciousnesses are prepared for an encounter that constitutes a recognitive relation. As we shall see, this does not yet exhaust the consequences of the structure of self-consciousness. But we can already note at this point that the motivation of self-consciousness to put its life at risk is to demonstrate its independence with regard to life. Its negativity is turned towards itself, as the double solitary struggle view argues, rather than towards another self-consciousness, as the duel view maintains. The other, motivated and required to achieve the same goal as the first, stands-in for the first self-consciousness’ acknowledgement of itself and provides the required externality. The same goes for the opposite direction.

D. The pure notion of recognition and its experience

The claim that self-consciousness’ relation to the object must be accounted for as an integral part of gaining recognition, stands in stark tension with the first group of paragraphs of “Independence and Dependence.” In these paragraphs, §178-§185, Hegel depicts an encounter of two self-consciousnesses that go through a three-round dialectical movement of self and other: in the first, self-consciousness comes out of itself, loses itself but also finds itself in the other; in the second it turns to overcome this newly discovered and confusing otherness of itself, by overcoming the other and affirming itself as the essential being in this relation. Yet, since it has already been caught up in the dialectic of self and other, overcoming the other is now one and the same as overcoming itself. The return to itself, then, brings with it the other, as self and other turn out to be intimately related. Self-consciousness cannot relate to the other as it relates to ordinary objects of desire; it cannot use it without its accord and whatever it does is mirrored by the other that does the same (§182), a crucial point for my reading to which I shall return. Finally, the whole dialectical movement depicted above should be thought of as a double movement because it describes what both self-consciousnesses go through in their encounter. Thus, the third round finds both self-consciousnesses aware that their independence is inseparable from their dependence upon each other, or as Hegel puts it: “each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself” (§184). Hegel’s well-known conclusion is that this dialectical elaboration of recognition shows that every recognition is a mutual recognition.

There are three points in this group of paragraphs that are important for the understanding of the struggle I suggest: the first is the idea of duplication (Verdopplung) that complicates self-consciousness from within and pushes it to seek acknowledgment from the other. It turns out now that the other plays a role in the self-conception of each of the self-consciousnesses; hence, Hegel’s claim that each self-consciousness “is aware that it at once is, and is not, another consciousness” (§184), means that killing or subjugating the other cannot leave self-consciousness intact. Similarly, the first self-consciousness’ self-negation affects the other. Second, this notion of duplication goes much deeper than merely entailing self-consciousness’ awareness of the other’s presence and significance in its own self-perception; it means that self-consciousness understands its own action as being doubled and attributed to the other too. Hegel argues that first, each sees the other mirroring his action, and then, what seems to be a passive mirroring becomes binding: “each does itself what it demands of the other,” which makes duplication a condition for the full realization of an action: each “does what it does only in so far as the other does the same” (§182). Finally, the action of each carries with it the significance that it is also done by the other. Ultimately no self-consciousness can act alone, at least in the context of its self-relation. Hegel formulates this carefully by writing that an action that self-consciousness directs against itself should be understood as directed against the other too “because it is indivisibly the action of one as well as the other” (§183). Hegel's insistence that the action directed at oneself is as if it is directed against the other too, rather than the other way around, together with the indiscernibility of the author of the action in this context (the one or the other) will prove crucial for the double solitary struggle view I suggest here. The final and third point, is Hegel’s distinction in §185 between the dialectical movement unfolded in the first group of paragraphs as the pure notion of recognition, and the text that follows which unfolds the experience of recognition-seeking self-consciousnesses.[[43]](#footnote-43)

What, then, is the import of the distinction between the pure notion of recognition and its experience? One clear consequence of the distinction that Hegel immediately puts forward is that in the experience we witness the breaking of the symmetry that is essential to recognition and is expressed in the idea of duplication and the mutuality of recognition that follows. Experience introduces instability into the relation between self-consciousnesses and instead of mutual recognition we get two self-consciousnesses of which one is recognized and the other recognizing (§185). This does not mean, however, that the insights that were gained by the elaboration of the dialectical movement of the pure notion of recognition are of no use. It means that duplication functions in a more complex manner than can be conceived within the pure notion: it is implied in the action of the individuals that engage in a struggle, yet these individuals do not achieve an actual mutuality of actions, or a perfect duplication: the first does something that the other avoids doing. Duplication forces each individual to face the fact that there is another whose actions stand in direct relation to hers in the sense that the other’s conduct in the struggle determines the first’s prospects of realizing herself as self-consciousness. In Hegelian terms, each determines the fate of the other’s attempt to unite its being in-itself and its being for-itself.

We can turn back now to the question of what makes the difference between the movement in the pure notion and the movement within experience. The answer, I claim, is that the pure notion of recognition lacks a central factor of the life of self-consciousness, i.e., its relation to external objects, its nature as consciousness drawn to these objects and determined by them. Experience is wider than the pure notion because it includes the relation to the external world. Consequently, we end up in a situation where the structural tension of self-consciousness between its attraction as consciousness to the external world, and its yearning for internal unity (both embodied in desire) is displayed through the relation between two self-consciousnesses: one that prevails in the struggle, is recognized and illustrates the inwardly-directed aspect of consciousness, the other that does not rise to the task, recognizes the other without being recognized, and illustrates the outwardly-directed aspect of self-consciousness. To show that this interpretation is plausible, we need to see now how the struggle relates to self-consciousness’ attitude towards external objects, the problem that seemed to be left behind with the presentation of the dialectical movement of the pure notion of recognition.

E. The struggle as illustrative of the structure of self-consciousness

Paragraphs §186-§189 sets the experiential framework that leads to the struggle while paragraphs §189-§196 unfold the relations between the post-struggle individuals, that is, master and slave. Thus, I will mainly discuss paragraphs §186-§189.

The nature of the encounter between self-consciousnesses depends upon the stage of their development as self-consciousnesses: initially they are not yet “the purely negative being of self-identical consciousness” (§186). This state can be accomplished only through the “rooting-out of all immediate being” and it is clear that this rooting-out must be performed through some action on self-consciousness’ part such that the other self-consciousness could recognize it as an accomplished self-consciousness, a pure being-for-self. The problem of self-consciousness, then, is that it must do something that projects the way in which it identifies itself such that it would be identified externally by another in the same way. Now, the crucial point is that Hegel argues that self-consciousness can attain truth “only if its own being-for-self had confronted it [=the other self-consciousness] as an independent object, or, what is the same thing, if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty” (ibid.). A careful reading of this passage suggests that when one self-consciousness encounters the other, the other must appear to the first as an independent object, that is, as already beyond the previous stage where it appeared as to “have not as yet accomplished the movement of absolute abstraction” (ibid.). Thus, if an encounter between two individuals would occur before they could have “exposed themselves to each other in the form of pure being-for-self” (ibid.) it would be premature; in order for the encounter to yield recognition it must be that they already advanced from their initial situation and reached a state where they can appear to each other as independent objects. In other words, their encounter must take place after they have rooted-out all immediate being. This reading is strengthened by the final lines of §186 where Hegel reminds the reader that according to the notion of recognition an encounter between two accomplished self-consciousnesses can occur “only when each in its own self through its own action, and again through the action of the other, achieves this pure abstraction of being-for-self”. Thus, the realization of mutual recognition is dependent upon an action by each of the individuals that must be matched by an action of their other.

What should one do in order to achieve absolute abstraction? Hegel sees such an action as the rooting-out of all immediate being. Immediate being is defined by Hegel as life (§186) and this includes the life of the individual whose task is to realize himself as self-consciousness. Hegel’s next step, then, is to refine the idea of the “rooting-out” (vertilgen) of all immediate being and he further clarifies the kind of action required as consisting “in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific existence, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life” (§187).

Now, we already know from the failure of the attempt to constitute its independence with regard to external objects that self-consciousness cannot demonstrate its independence by performing the same action, e.g., consuming, repeatedly. Self-consciousness needs an act that would demonstrate its detachment from life, one decisive act that will express its relation to the whole of the external world, or life, at once. The only effective way to achieve such a level of negation is to negate one’s own life. It should be remembered that at this stage self-consciousness is still certain of the possibility of its complete separateness and hence independence with regard to life (including its own). The rational path for it to pursue, then, is the elimination of its dependence on life by annihilating its own life which is the medium through which self-consciousness is attached to life in general.

We can return now to discuss the duel view according to which each is seeking to bring about the death of the other. This would mean according to §186 that although each knows that he is dependent somehow on the others’ action as a completion of his own action, he still seeks the other’s death. As we saw above, moreover, according to the duplication requirement, any act performed by one self-consciousness should be attributed to the other too. Now, it might be argued that the statement in §187 in which self-consciousness shows itself as negating its objective mode can be read as a natural consequence of its assault on another self-consciousness which clearly puts its life at risk. However, engaging in a struggle with another self-consciousness does not directly negate self-consciousness’ objective mode, or shows that it is not attached to life. Seeking to kill the other might be dangerous but it demonstrates first and foremost negativity towards the life of another. Moreover, an attempt to overcome the other only repeats self-consciousness’ relation to external objects. Self-consciousness already learned that a serial overcoming of objects only reveals its own dependence upon the object which is the opposite of what it originally intended. Repeating the same with another self-consciousness instead of an object will not bring it closer to its goal. We saw in section B above that positions like those of Kojève and others must acknowledge a plurality of struggles if self-consciousness is motivated to kill the other. There are always more others than one. Thus, seeking to kill the other is not a direct negation of one’s own life but rather a negation of the other’s, and this would be an unreasonable repetition of the same failed course of action that was taken towards external objects.

Hegel’s formulation of the action taken by self-consciousness deserves a careful reading: as we saw above the existence of another self-consciousness generates a duplication within self-consciousness. This means that self-consciousness’ acts of self-perception involve duplication. Such duplication holds the key, I suggest, to Hegel’s depiction of the life and death struggle as a twofold action. Significantly, Hegel chooses to describe this twofold action as an “action on the part of the other, and action on its own part”. The choice to open with the other clarifies the claim that “in so far as it is the action of the other, each seeks the death of the other. But in doing so … action on its own part, is also involved; for the former involves the staking of one’s own life.” Now, we must bear in mind that we are facing the same action on the part of both self-consciousnesses. Hegel insists that it is only when we consider the action of the first self-consciousness as the action of the other, it should be seen as if each seeks the death of the other. Let’s say we have two self-consciousnesses, Georg and Wilhelm. Georg stakes his life, and as it should also be considered as the action of the other, we can say that Georg seeks the death of Wilhelm. It should be emphasized that Hegel could have written in a straightforward manner that each self-consciousness seeks the death of the other; yet he writes that only under the condition that we consider the action of one as the action of the other we are in a position to say that the one (Georg) seeks the death of the other (Wilhelm). Wilhelm’s action mirrors the action of Georg; thus, we arrive at what Hegel described as a double movement of two self-consciousnesses that duplicate each other. Each proves itself in its own life and death struggle, in which the other is involved by duplication and by being expected to act exactly as the first.

The actions of each are self-directed and each must prove that it is not submerged in the expanse of life and that it regards everything within life as a vanishing moment. Seeking the death of the other means no more than what Hegel writes in the context of pure recognition: “each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same” (§182). Wilhelm is an immediate being that is “entangled in a variety of relationships” (§187) just like his other, Georg. Taking part in constituting Georg’s self-relation, Wilhelm is expected to do the same as Georg does to himself (otherwise Georg’s attempt to achieve self-relation will fail, and vice versa).

The understanding of self-consciousness’ act as one of self-negation rather than as an annihilation of another is strengthened by §188. There, Hegel refers to the death of oneself as the successful execution of self-consciousness’ action and argues that is a Pyrrhic victory. An action that is intended to bring about one’s own death, Hegel argues, “is an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession” (§188). If we read this as describing the situation of one that seeks the other’s death by engaging in a struggle, he would find himself in a strange conflict: on the one hand, he sets out to kill the other, while on the other what he needs to demonstrate can only be achieved by being killed. How should one act in a combat with the other when he has such contradictory aims? Moreover, all this is equally true of the other. Hence, according to the widely accepted reading, we should imagine a fight where each is trying to get killed by the other. Yet, this reading is not necessary: if each stakes his own life and expect the other to do the same, Hegel’s reasoning becomes simple: killing oneself is an abstract negation, and self-consciousness must refine its understanding of the required action in order to overcome “the expanse of life”, without actually dying, or in Hegel’s terms “survive its own supersession”.

The best result would have been achieved if each self-consciousness had put its life at risk in such a way as proves that it holds its life of no account, while both surviving their respective struggles. In such a case the struggle of each would complete the other’s struggle and the combination would yield mutual recognition, or their realization as self-consciousnesses, and this time not only as a pure notion but within the experience of self-consciousness where it is constantly drawn to external objects.

However, the sole outcome that Hegel discusses is the one that he schematically mentions at the beginning of the description of the experience of recognition, the one that exhibits the inequality of self-consciousness, where we might say somewhat imprecisely that one is only recognized and the other only recognizing.[[44]](#footnote-44) We are now in a position to understand why this is the only interesting outcome of the struggle, and in fact, the only possible one from the perspective of the structure of self-consciousness. It is the only one that displays the duality of self-consciousness as pure abstraction, as an ‘I’ that refers to itself as its own object, and as a consciousness which is attached to external things, and to its living body as one of these things that it cannot overcome. As I claimed above, the experience of recognition must contain a difference that distinguishes it from the pure notion of recognition: self-consciousness’ relation to things, which must be determined before the encounter with another self-consciousness. The double solitary struggle produces two self-consciousnesses that display the two-sided structure of self-consciousness: the one proved itself in the struggle and demonstrated its independence while the other is a “consciousness in the form of thinghood” (§189). They are master and slave only because they are bound from the start by their nature as self-consciousnesses to be related to each other in such a way that each’s solitary trial by death impacts the other’s status. The aspect of self-consciousness that is attached to life and worldly things, i.e., consciousness, prevent it from realizing itself through the joint effort of the two. The crucial role that consciousness’ relation to things plays in the master-slave relationship is highlighted by Hegel’s characterization of each of the figures: the slave is the one who has failed to overcome the independence of things and hence is described as the “consciousness whose nature is to be bound up with an existence that is independent, or thinghood in general” (§190). The master relates both “to a thing as such, the object of desire” and to a consciousness which is related to that thing; his relation to each is mediated by the other moment. In other words, the master’s relation to things is mediated through the slave and his relation to the slave is mediated through his relation to the thing. Hegel stresses that what keeps the slave in his state is his relation to things: “it is his chain from which he could not break free in the struggle, thus proving himself to be dependent, to possess his independence in thinghood” (§190). The master’s power over the slave is defined as a transitive relation: “since he [=the master] is the power over this thing and this [=the thing] is the power over the other [=the slave], it follows that he holds the other in subjection” (§190). Their relation to each other is determined, then, by their relation to things and not by any direct relation between them that expresses the result of a duel-like interaction. If such a direct interaction were to happen, the direct submission of one of them to the other would have been enough to characterize their relation to each other without any appeal to their relation to things, whatever these relations might have been.

The widely accepted duel view has the advantage of providing a very clear and familiar image: it is an antagonistic encounter of two individuals that is decided by the determination projected by each of the opponents. What could be the image of the struggle according to the double solitary view? In a parenthetical remark Pinkard rejects the possibility of risking one’s life in an act that is not directly in contact with another self-consciousness. He argues that engaging in a life-endangering activity like wrestling with a lion cannot be sufficient for the affirmation of self-consciousness’ goal which is, according to Pinkard, the primacy of its own subjective point of view over others. Wrestling with a lion, though dangerous, is an isolated act and cannot achieve more than self-consciousness’ self-affirmation as a practical agent, that “he is willing to run certain risks for certain ends”.[[45]](#footnote-45) Indeed, wrestling with a lion, although clearly an example of putting one’s life at stake, would not fulfill self-consciousness’ purpose, but this is for a different reason than the one Pinkard provides. Wrestling with a lion is, after all, an attempt to overcome a specific object, and this was exactly the problem that self-consciousness tackled at first when it serially demonstrated its negative attitude towards objects. Yet, Pinkard ignores a different aspect of the example he gives, which points to another possibility: self-consciousness can engage in an activity that puts its life at risk without any kind of opponent, be it animal or human. Such is an act in which self-consciousness’ challenge is its own fear of death.

Indeed, that is what Hegel writes in §194 describing the experience of the would-be slave during the struggle. This is the only instance in which Hegel refers to what one of the struggling self-consciousnesses is going through during the struggle: “For this consciousness [=the slave] has been fearful, not because of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations”. This powerful description makes it clear that whatever serves as the setting of this experience, the struggling self-consciousness is not focused on a particular thing, no matter how dangerous and terrifying it might be, but is confronted with “the absolute Lord” – the fear of death – and nothing else. This description is also revealing of the experience of the self-consciousness who emerges from the struggle and becomes master; it goes through that same experience yet does not yield to the fear of death as the other. Thus, it demonstrates that it holds life of no account while surviving the experience, or in Hegel’s words “survives its own supersession” (§188).

Interpreting the life and death struggle as a double solitary struggle which each of the self-consciousnesses must face on its own seems to provide a position that respects the constraints listed at the end of section B. Hegel’s struggle is illustrative of the two aspects of the structure of self-consciousness; the aspect that is determined by objects, consciousness, and the aspect that sees itself as self-determining, self-consciousness. That is why there are only two protagonists, no more and no less. Their motivation is a consequence of self-consciousness’ task to realize itself by relating to itself and overcoming its relation to objects, and not by an external challenge that is imposed by another self-consciousness. The fact that each self-consciousness demands the other’s recognition does not exempt it from demonstrating its independence with regard to the external world, or life, making their motivations symmetrical. The final result which illustrates the limits of what self-consciousness can achieve and the failure of self-realization it brings about, is a consequence of its own structure. As is common in the Phenomenology, this failure leads necessarily to the protagonist’s next stage, who is equipped now with the insights gained during the attempt at establishing the independence of self-consciousness through the process of mutual recognition.

I hope to have shown that the widely accepted duel view is fraught with difficulties from which the double solitary struggle view does not suffer. This is not to deny that recognitive relations are social, or at least intersubjective, but to maintain that at the stage of the Phenomenology where the life and death struggle appears, self-consciousness fails to achieve this goal due to its own structure and the dynamics that follows. This structure, then, must be surpassed in order to constitute those social relations that allow for the freedom of the individuals involved.

1. G.W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). References will be given to paragraph numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*: *Lectures* *on “The Phenomenology of Spirit*,” compiled R. Queneau, trans. J. H. Nichols (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for example, Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit,”* trans. S. Cherniak and J. Heckman (Northwestern University Press, 1974), 156, 164, 169–70; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. C. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 64–65; Robert R. Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 171–75; Leo Rauch and David Sherman, *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Self-Consciousness* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 2, 80, 91; Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (Routledge, 2005), 187–88; Robert Stern, "Is Hegel's Master–Slave Dialectic a Refutation of Solipsism?" *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (2) (2012): 351–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, John McDowell, “The Apperceptive I and the Empirical Self: Towards a Heterodox Reading of ‘Lordship and Bondage’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*”, in *Having the World in View: Essays on Kant, Hegel, and Sellars* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 147-165. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, (Cambridge University Press 1989); *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton University Press 2011). Robert B. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: a Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Harvard University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For Kojève’s influence on the prevailing attitude to Hegel’s philosophy in France, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9–15; and Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 63–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stephen Houlgate, “G. W. F Hegel: The Phenomenology of Spirit”, in Robert C. Solomon, *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy*, (Blackwell Publishing 2003); *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, (Blackwell Publishing 2005 2nd ed.), pp. 67-71; *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Bloomsbury 2013, pp. 93-102. See also, Frederick Neuhouser, "Desire, Recognition, and the Relation between Bondsman and Lord," *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Kenneth R. Westphal (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 37-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Brandom also refers to the distinction between the animal and the human as crucial for the passage from desire to recognition. See Brandom 2019, pp. 241-243. This distinction is not mentioned in Hegel’s text and hence is of questionable relevance to the interpretation of Hegelian self-consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kojève 1980, p. 40. Houlgate rightly criticizes Kojève’s concept of desire as an “absence of being”, arguing that in Hegel desire confirms and enhances the subject’s sense of self rather than fills a void, see Houlgate 2003, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kojève 1980, p. 39, original italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 41, original italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kojève does not clarify the nature of the relations between these two motivations: the motivation to gain prestige and the motivation to subjugate another desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pippin calls this “the conventional view” and rejects it because it requires the implausible assumption that Hegel starts a new topic – the passage from a pre-political state to a political one – that is not continuous with the three preceding chapters, see Pippin 2011, pp. 61-64. Pippin, however, does not reject all of the elements of the view. Most importantly, he adopts the idea of the struggle as an unavoidable conflict that cannot be resolved by appealing to some common ground. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an analysis of the differences between the interpretations of Pinkard and Pippin on the one side, and Brandom on the other, see Torjus Midtgarden, “Conflicting and Complementary Conceptions of Discursive Practice in Non-Metaphysical Interpretations of Hegel”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39 (2013), pp. 559-576. These differences, however, do not touch upon the issues discussed in the present paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For Pinkard the struggle is over “whose point of view is authoritative,” and for Brandom over being recognized as “a sovereign desiring taker.” See Pinkard 1994, p. 57, Brandom 2019, p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 58. See also Pippin 1989, pp. 158-159, 162; Pippin 2011, p. 75; Brandom 2019 pp. 333-334. There are slight differences between their respective terms, but the idea is similar: the lack of a common ground that allows the opponents to mediate their different positions. This is supposed to make the struggle between two self-consciousnesses inevitable. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Brandom 2019, p. 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Brandom 2019, pp. 238-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pippin 2011, p. 78, original italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Brandom 2019, pp. 258-261. As Brandom notes, it is a partial constitution that can be completed only by the recognition of another. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Pippin 2011, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See for example Pippin 2011, p. 73 where he claims that an uninterrupted fulfilment of desires “would have been possible but for the presence of two such subjects and merely finite resources.” See also Pippin 1989, p. 157. As we shall see later, the basic problem is not the extent to which desires might be fulfilled, but rather the dependence upon objects revealed through desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Pippin 1989, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Pippin’s remark can be developed into an objection to Kojève’s idea that prestige transcends the given. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Pippin 1989, p. 162. An epistemologically oriented version of these opposing assumptions can be found in Pinkard 1994, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I am not arguing that human beings that are able to provide reasons for their actions and commitments necessarily avoid fighting each other. Yet, Hegelian self-consciousnesses are attempting to realize themselves by negating the spoils which subjects are usually after when engaging in a struggle with others. Thus, even if they are not fully rational at this stage, they are far from being exemplars of irrationality. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Houlgate 2003, p. 20; Houlgate 2005, p. 68; Houlgate 2013, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Houlgate 2003, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Houlgate 2003, p. 18. The distinction suggested by Houlgate is sensitive to two different groups of paragraphs in Hegel’s text, the first describing an encounter that ends with mutual recognition (§178-§185), which Hegel refers to as “the pure notion of recognition” (§185) while the second (§186-§189) discusses the experience of the struggle that leads to the master-slave dialectic. I discuss this distinction in section D below. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. McDowell 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See the exchange between Houlgate and McDowell in *The Owl of Minerva* 41 (2009/2010): Stephen Houlgate, “McDowell, Hegel and *the Phenomenology of Spirit*”, pp. 13-26; John McDowell, “Response to Stephen Houlgate”, pp. 27-38; Stephen Houlgate, “Response to John McDowell”, pp. 39-51. The reference is to McDowell, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Apart from referring explicitly to two individuals several times throughout the master and slave section, Hegel distinguishes the movement of the unhappy consciousness from the one that takes place in our section by indicating that in the unhappy consciousness only one individual is involved. See §206. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For different versions of the idea that one self-consciousness paves the way to the other by negating itself, see Pinkard 1994, p. 52, Neuhouser 2009, p. 45, Houlgate 2013, pp. 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Indeed, they are so different that a commentator like Westphal suggests reading into Hegel’s text two distinct kinds of struggle, see Kenneth R. Westphal, *Grounds of Pragmatic Realism:* *Hegel’s Internal Critique and Reconstruction of Kant’s Critical Philosophy* (Brill, 2018),p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. McDowell 2009, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Houlgate 2005, p. 68 for such a framing of the chapter on self-consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. In contrast to the approach presented here some maintain that Hegel points to a passage from desire to recognition. See for example, Brandom 2019, p. 246, Houlgate 2003, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Thus, contrary to the image according to which only the other self-consciousness negates itself for the sake of the first, see note 37 above. Such an interpretation violates the required symmetry between the two self-consciousness and leaves inexplicable the motivation of the other self-consciousness to put itself at the service of the first. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For an analysis that distinguishes paragraphs §178-§185 from the rest of the section see Michael Quante, “‘The Pure Notion of Recognition’: Reflections on the Grammar of the Relation of Recognition in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*”, in Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch, Christopher F. Zurn (eds.), *The Philosophy of Recognition: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Lexington Books 2010), pp. 92, 97. Quante’s distinction is between the levels of philosophical and natural consciousnesses. See also note 29 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. I say ‘imprecisely’ because it is clear that if the notion of recognition requires mutuality, then, no one can be ‘only recognized’ or ‘only recognizing’. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Pinkard 1994, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)