CHAPTER FIVE

THE METAPHYSICS OF RECOGNITION
ON HEGEL’S CONCEPT OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS
IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT

Arthur Kok

Introduction

This contribution proposes to understand Hegel’s self-consciousness chapter in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (PhoS) as his alternative to Kant’s idea of the transcendental ‘I’. Kant’s project: Thinking the possibility of metaphysics is comparable to Hegel’s project in the PhoS. Of course, Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness has epistemological and socio-theoretical implications, but in this paper I will focus on Hegel’s metaphysical position that justifies these implications. It is not original to draw attention to making the comparison between the transcendental ‘I’ and the Hegelian self-consciousness. Well-known scholars have already emphasized that Hegel’s concept of self-consciousness aims to improve the Kantian notion of it.1 In my opinion, however, they fail to identify the precise difference because they overlook an important similarity.

In this paper, I will present the view that Hegel further develops the Kantian idea that we cannot perceive unity, but only think it. Yet, this is not the only similarity to Kant. Like Kant, Hegel holds on to the view that although we are unable to perceive nature’s unity, and that we ourselves are the unity of nature, it still exists relatively independently from us. In opposition to ‘standard’ idealism, such as Berkeley’s, in which nature only exists insofar as it is perceived, Hegel does not reduce nature to being just an idea of reason. Different from Kant, however, Hegel not only points out the fundamental distinction between self-consciousness and nature, but also their oneness. The difference between them exists within the subject itself. This position is not alien to Kant, but belongs to his practical

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1 E.g., the recent wave of Anglo-Saxon Hegel-scholars, including most notably, Pippin, Pinkard and Houlgate, all emphazise that Hegel takes the Kantian project as his starting point.
philosophy. The practical standpoint of reason implies a position in which the subject is both natural and intellectual. So, Hegel's actual program in the self-consciousness chapter then is to think the unity of practical and theoretical reason.

Thus, the core problem that Hegel tries to tackle is the problem of the unity of reason. I claim that Hegel takes Kant's practical view on the unity of reason, autonomous freedom, to be the intrinsic unity of the transcendental subject and the thing-in-itself which remain irreconcilable in Kant's theoretical philosophy. Hegel does not regard the relation between the transcendental subject and the autonomous subject as 'precise concordance',\(^2\) as does Kant, but shows that freedom—not in the sense of spontaneity, but as autonomy—is the essence of the transcendental 'I'. In Hegel's view, the autonomous subject is identical to the thing-in-itself, because the thing-in-itself \(\text{as such}\) has the structure of a subject. Hegel does not deny, however, that the thing-in-itself has no otherness for the subject, but this otherness is not alien to it, as Kant maintains. Philosophical or metaphysical knowledge, i.e. knowledge of the thing-in-itself, is self-knowledge, yet the self or subject that is known exists essentially in a relation to otherness. In the end, the essence of our being, autonomy, must be understood as the unity of independency and dependency of the subject. This is made explicit in the lord/bondsman relation in the self-consciousness chapter of the PhoS. Hegel calls this relation of independency and dependency recognition. His concept of recognition replaces Kant's idea of the transcendental 'I' as an adequate concept for self-consciousness, without failing to integrate the most important element of the transcendental subject, namely to be the condition for metaphysics.

To make my thesis about the metaphysical importance of the self-consciousness chapter in the PhoS more feasible, I will first draw some relations between this book and the \textit{Science of Logic} (SoL). In the introduction to \textit{The Science of Subjective Logic}, Hegel discusses directly with Kant about the nature of subjectivity. This discussion is helpful to understand how we can relate the self-consciousness chapter in the PhoS to Kant's transcendental project of the possibility of metaphysics. The main body of my contribution will consist in a reading of the self-consciousness chapter of the PhoS. I will systematically evaluate the dialectical structure of this chapter, drawing special attention to Hegel's famous introduction of \textit{life} in the first part of the self-consciousness chapter.

\(^{2}\) I borrow this phrase from Martin Moors (1990), p. 20.