1. Hegel as a Challenge

Though it seems somewhat excessive to characterize the theory of recognition as a “well-established and mature research paradigm in philosophy”, it cannot be denied that for the past couple decades there has been intensive debate about recognition which has commanded ever greater attention. This debate began with topics in practical philosophy, especially political and social philosophy. As it developed, however, recognition has achieved thematically and historically such broad significance, that a new philosophical paradigm indeed seems to be in the making: Recognition turns out to be a fundamental concept, relevant not only for understanding political issues, but for our human world as a whole. Hence, the concept of recognition now includes such notions as subjectivity, objectivity, rationality, knowledge, personality, sociality, identity, otherness, nature, logic, etc. The protagonists in this debate seek to make German idealism fruitful for contemporary problems. Whereas neo-Kantians a century ago also sought to update German idealism, though focussing on Kant as the philosopher of modern culture, contemporary theorists of recognition intend to rejuvenate Hegel's philosophy.

This attempt to return to Hegel exhibits rather divergent interpretations of his philosophy, and also a remarkable turning away from Hegel's mature system, as outlined in his Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften of 1830. Hegel's philosophical project of developing self-knowledge of the idea through the three elements of pure thought, nature and spirit appears
to his critics just as unconvincing as, e.g., his non-dialogical, monological, concept of rationality and normativity. By contrast, I shall argue that Hegel as systematic philosopher confronts the contemporary paradigm of recognition with difficult and far-reaching questions concerning its own foundation, both methodologically and thematically. Consider first the following background considerations.

According to the protagonists of recognition, the principle of recognition is central to Hegel’s practical philosophy in his Jena period, especially in his unpublished “Geistphilosophie” (1805/6) and Phänomenologie des Geistes (1807). Yet it can hardly be said that in these texts Hegel develops a comprehensive theory of recognition. Hence it is little surprise to find detailed, though independent attempts to interpret e.g. the Phänomenologie as the core of Hegel’s theory of recognition. And Hegel’s later philosophy, as published in his Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften (1830) and the Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts (1821), does not seem to pay much attention to the principle of recognition (let alone the principle of mutual recognition). It is subordinated to other, more embracing principles. Hegel’s later works are characterized by a relation to logic very different to his early works. This reflects a further important contrast: In his early works, Hegel, inspired by Kant, elaborated something like ‘practical philosophy’. Yet in the course of his intellectual development Hegel criticized Kant’s moral philosophy and philosophy of religion ever more radically. Hegel’s mature views present a philosophy of spirit which seeks to overcome the opposition between theoretical and practical philosophy, or more precisely: from the start it has already overcome that opposition. Unlike Hegel, however, the protagonists of recognition conceive Hegel’s philosophy of spirit as ‘practical’ philosophy; indeed, ‘Hegel’s practical philosophy’ functions, in various permutations, as a popular book title.

5 Cf. influential studies like Siep (1979).
6 Cf. for instance Cobben (2009b), who, in order to hold his thesis, is forced to press the Phänomenologie into a different programmatic corset and to ascribe to this work a different place in Hegel’s system. Kok (2013) follows Cobben in this.
7 Cf. for the Kantianism of the young Hegel, e.g., Bondeli (1997), Fulda (2003, Teil I) and Henrich (1971); for the development of the young Hegel cf. also Siep (2010a, 24–62).
8 Cf. e.g.: Siep 2010a; Pippin 2008; Rózsa 2005. As for many others, for Honneth too Hegel’s philosophy of objective spirit is “practical philosophy” (2001, 17 f., 41). Also Quante follows this route; he emphasizes a “primacy of the practical” as Hegel’s “pragmatic” root (2011, 238). Cf. also Quante 2011, 24 f.: Here Quante states that the free will is the basic principle of Hegel’s “practical philosophy”, and 19 f. he is of the opinion that the “central goal” of Hegel’s “whole practical philosophy” is to reconcile the tension between individual interests and the ethical (sittlich) collectivity, i.e. to develop an “Aristotelian conception