

Reciprocity, Recognition and Relational Organicism: The *Spirit* of Hegelian Social Theory

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Introduction

This paper represents a contribution to a longstanding discussion between Professor G W Trompf and myself on the nature of Hegelian philosophy in general. I present it both in the spirit of continued dialogue with an old friend over a disputed topic and as an indication of some, admittedly quite abstract, points where his work has influenced my own. In this paper I address the issue of social and political organicism, which is a way of approaching social and political theory by understanding the socio-political realm as displaying features that could be described as organic, the features of self-organisation, self-sufficiency and unity. The exact implications of this understanding of the socio-political realm are disputed. Many have claimed that it results in a form of social holism and hence is hostile to the individual and to liberal individualism in general. Others, though a minority, have understood organicism in different terms, finding in this theory a way of bridging the gap between liberal individualism and more holistic or communitarian conceptions of the social. One of the most important claims of those who take the latter approach is that social or political organicism is a theory based in reciprocal and non-dominating relations between agents, both individual and institutional. Thus the unity that is involved in the organic conception of the social is a unity of reciprocity. It will be noted here that, for those who worry about the status of the individual in the organic conception of the social, the notion of ‘reciprocal non-dominating relations’ carries a heavy burden. This paper addresses itself to that burden; it aims to give theoretical form to that unity of reciprocity.

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If one accepts that Hegel's social and political theory presents us with a 'relational' rather than a 'holistic' organicism,¹ then the proper account of these relations is recognitive. In other words, a relational conception of social or political organicism can be fulfilled by giving a recognitive account of those relations. Recognition theory, which has a recognisably Hegelian heritage, gives deeper theoretical content to Hegel's organicism. Further, the intersection of the organic theory of the social and a recognitive account of relations within the social provides us with unique theoretical insights into the nature of that sphere of *Geist* or Spirit that Hegel calls 'Objective' *Geist*. These insights can then be applied to the Hegelian conception of Spirit generally, inviting the conclusion that Hegelian *Geist* or Spirit has an 'organic' structure. When *Geist* is understood as having such an structure, the reading of *Geist* as a superpersonal force, indifferent to human agency,² also comes into question. Thus we are led from an organic social ontology to the phenomenon of recognition and ultimately towards an organic account of *Geist* in general. This constitutes not only a contribution to Hegel studies, but to social theory and to the philosophy of culture more generally.

This paper focuses predominantly on the nature of relation within what we call, along with Avital Simhony, 'relational organicism'. I will not spend time justifying this reading of Hegel's references to the organic in his social and political theory; I defend this reading in other works and, in that it coheres with the reading of Avital Simhony, Robert Williams and Sally Sedgwick, it is not particularly controversial. I offer a more original contribution to understanding the organic thesis in Hegel, giving a theoretical account of the nature of the relations that exist within 'relational' organicism. This serves to fulfil theoretically what is a fairly abstract conceptualisation of Hegel's approach to the socio-political realm. Before doing so, I must explain the relational reading of Hegel's organicism and why it is to be preferred over a holistic reading. This is not a fulsome account of

¹ P A Quadrio, *Towards a Theory of Organic Relations: Hegel's Social Theory from Tubingen to Jena*, PhD Dissertation (The University of Sydney, 2006) 15-38.

² I Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, 1990) 42.

the relational theory but merely serves to prime the reader for the subsequent discussion.

On Relational Organicism

I have argued elsewhere that, while Hegel certainly held an organic conception of the state, and indeed of the social more generally, this did not, as is commonly thought, imply a commitment to social holism.³ In a holistic conception of the social, the elements are reduced to a function of the whole and thus they have no positive status outside that whole. In regard to the community, this would imply that members of the community are merely a function of that community and have no positive status outside of it. Such a thought horrifies many in the liberal tradition, which has its centre of gravity in the rights and liberties of the individual. Insofar as the holistic conception of society sees the individual as a function of society, it threatens such individual rights and freedoms. Thus in the liberal anglophone world of the mid-twentieth century, a number of essays emerged that either implicitly or explicitly attacked the Hegelian conception of the socio-political realm as holistic and often did so by reference to Hegel's organicism. In this regard one might mention the work of Karl Popper,⁴ H J McCloskey⁵ and John Macmurray.⁶ One of the most notable figures in this landscape, and an intellectual mentor to Professor Trompf, was the Oxford historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin.⁷

In general, the critics of organicism have tended to equate the organic state with holism, a view which then invokes the threat of a totalitarian cancellation of individual interest. Insofar as the critics make such an equation, many, like Berlin, have misunderstood the theory, misread its implications and misunderstood its motivations.

³ Quadrio, *op cit*, 15-38.

⁴ K R Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1966).

⁵ H J McCloskey, 'The State as an Organism, as a Person and as an End in Itself', *The Philosophical Review* 72, 1963.

⁶ J Macmurray, *John Macmurray: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Exeter, 2004).

⁷ I Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in G Sher and B A Brody, eds, *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Readings* (Orlando, 1999).

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Elsewhere, I have criticised Berlin's discussion of the organic elements to Hegel's theory, analysing in particular his comments on the organic conception of society in the essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty',⁸ against remarks in the collection *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. I shall not rehearse my criticisms of Berlin here. Suffice to say that, in concluding that Hegel's references to the organic imply a holistic understanding of the state or of society generally, Berlin misunderstands the nature of Hegel's organicism.⁹ Against Berlin's holistic reading of organicism, I offer a reading of the organic thesis as a 'relational theory'.¹⁰

In that the organic society is not holistic but rather relational, the relations between the part (member) and whole (community/state), as well as between the parts (members) themselves, are caught up in a dynamic of mutual or reciprocal dependence. No member by itself can function autonomously. Organic relations are, to borrow a phrase from Sally Sedgwick, those of 'reciprocal determination',¹¹ in that each element influences each other and no term in the relation has priority. Every element is reciprocally determining and determined; the elements are mutually penetrating. Similarly, between the whole and the part, each is both determined and determining; they are mutually penetrating. It is not the case that the individual is a function of the whole, since the whole is seen as constituted by the specific attitudes, beliefs and actions of the elements, while the elements are the elements that they are because the whole itself constitutes a framework in which such attitudes, beliefs and actions can form and against which they make sense. The integrity of this specific unity requires that every aspect of it is essential, nothing is inessential, and each contributes to and is contributed to by each other. Within this kind of unity, no act by any agent, be it individual or institutional, can be considered to be isolated or insulated from other acts and other agents. There is no ontological priority. This organic unity offers an

⁸ Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', *op cit*, 624-35.

⁹ Quadrio, *op cit*, 15-25.

¹⁰ Quadrio, *op cit*, 25-38.

¹¹ S Sedgwick, 'The State as Organism: The Metaphysical Basis of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36 (Supplement), 2000, 183.

alternative to individualism and holism. To borrow from Williams, as a conception of society, it is an alternative to a nominalistic pluralism on the one hand and a totalitarian monism¹² on the other, because its moments do not lie in opposition¹³ but are bound by reciprocity.¹⁴ Insofar as critics like Berlin see Hegelian organicism as a form of totalitarian monism wherein the whole has priority, they misunderstand that approach to the social. In particular they miss the deep reciprocity in the relations, not only between elements but also between the elements and the whole. (I add, as it will be important later in this essay, that, insofar as critics see *Geist* as a totalising monism having ontological priority over its manifestations or elements, they misunderstand *Geist*. They miss, in particular, the deep reciprocity and dynamism that is vital to *Geist*.)

For Hegel, one of the essential features of this way of understanding the social is that society, or the whole, can be seen simultaneously as the product of the activity of the individuals who comprise it and as something that has contributed to their own formation *qua* individuals. The society and the individuals in it are mutually constituting. Society or the whole is not some alien ‘thing’ that sits over and above the individual but is rather a product of the collective activity of the individuals in it. It is a mode of collective self-understanding, a way of relating to ourselves as part of a collective enterprise. It is how ‘we’ have come to organise ‘our’ common life. The whole thus provides a vehicle for a form of universal self-consciousness, facilitating a collective self-understanding, a way of relating to ourselves as a collective while not reducing our self-understanding to a mere function of that collective.

This notion of universal self-relation will be disambiguated later in this paper. For the moment, we can say that, in the organic theory, the kind of universal self-relation or self-consciousness that is constituted

¹² R R Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley, 1997) 295.

¹³ The language of opposition being the language of the logic of essence in Hegel's later work.

¹⁴ The language of reciprocity being the language of the logic of the concept in Hegel's later work.

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by a community – its capacity to think of itself or to refer to itself as a community – is bound up in reciprocal or dynamic relations. This mode of self-relation is non-static and changes with the changing social relations of that community; it is a mode of self-relation that is in movement. In that the part (member) is informed by the whole (community), the part (member) is transformed by the whole (community). But insofar as this is so, so too the whole (community) of which it is a part is transformed to a greater or lesser extent. This is the principle of reciprocity acting in the social realm. The universal self-consciousness or the ‘we’ of the organic society interpenetrates all members and all institutions; one cannot think of oneself as external to others or to institutions. It is due to this interpenetration that ‘we’ see this society, community or state as ‘ours’, something in which ‘we’ have a collective stake and which has a stake in us. The society, community or state is ‘ours’ in the way that the family is ‘ours’: not in the sense that it is the kind of thing that we possess, but in the sense that we are co-constituting members of it, so that, if any member were lost or even ‘replaced’, the family itself would undergo transformation. The family is not a material possession like the family home; it is ‘ours’ in the sense that we can rationally affirm it and see ourselves in it. It is ‘ours’ in the sense that our reasons for acting are ‘ours’.

As a reading of Hegel’s social and political theory, the notion of a ‘relational organism’ – as opposed to a ‘holistic organism’ – has the resources to answer critics such as Berlin, Popper and others.¹⁵ Yet it would seem inadequate simply to state that the relations that exist within such an ‘organic’ social form are non-dominating relations of mutuality and reciprocity. Such locutions are too vague. In order to defend this notion of a relational organism, the notion of ‘relation’ must be given stronger theoretical content. In this paper, this notion will be filled out by reference to recognition theory. It will be argued that the reciprocal relations within the organic society offered by Hegel are, in fact, recognitive relations. By connecting the notion of recognition theory to the notion of relational organism, I make a contribution to understanding the structure of Hegelian *Geist*. In

¹⁵ Quadrio, *op cit*, 15-38.

previous papers, I have focused on the emergence of *Geist*,¹⁶ giving a non-metaphysical reading which can be summed up, borrowing a phrase from the great American Hegel scholar Robert Williams, by saying that recognition is the ‘existential phenomenological genesis’¹⁷ of *Geist*. *Geist* has an intersubjective genesis, emerging from a moment of recognition that passes between two mutually or reciprocally recognising subjects. Yet, as any undergraduate students of Hegel will tell us, Hegelian *Geist* manifests at three different levels: as Subjective *Geist*, as Objective *Geist* and as Absolute *Geist*. Hence any insights drawn about the nature of *Geist* from this intersection of recognition theory and organic theory must also address the ‘Subjective’ and ‘Absolute’ dimensions of Hegelian *Geist*. My focus will remain predominantly on the social or ‘Objective’ level but, towards the end of the paper, I articulate how this position impacts on Subjective and Absolute *Geist*. The results of this analysis are therefore important for Hegel studies, for socio-political theory and for the philosophy of culture generally.

The Recognitive Nature of the ‘We’

The next task then is to turn to the subject of *Anerkennung* or, as it is referred to in English, recognition theory. It would be impossible to give a complete account of that theory here. Commentators such as Williams, L Seip, J Habermas and A Hönneth (to name a few) provide this. I will introduce features of it that are important in my later argument. If we accept that Hegel’s political theory presents a relational organicism in which there is a reciprocal or mutual relation between the elements, and between the elements and the whole, something more must be said about the nature of the relations that exist. Recognition theory can be used to fill out the relational theory and provide a more detailed account of the type of relations found in the organic society. As we shall see, the recognitive relation is one whereby the *relata* are mutually penetrating, reciprocally informing

¹⁶ P A Quadrio, ‘*Geist* and Normativity in Hegel’s Early Theological Writings’ in F Di Lauro, ed, *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred* (Sydney, 2006) 95-112.

¹⁷ Williams, *op cit*, 91.

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and transforming. It is a union which preserves the freedom or independence of the elements united by releasing each element to make its own particular contribution to the relation. This relation cannot adequately be thought, either purely in terms of an aggregation of the parts or purely in terms of the whole, since it is a relation which expands or enriches each of the elements involved by bringing them into relation. Organicism can thus be thought of as the complement of recognition theory, in that it provides an account of the structure and nature of the phenomenon of recognition from a social-theoretic perspective. This claim needs to be developed, but before anything can be said in this regard, we need an account of the recognitive relation.

Recognition theory has a very broad scope and so, in giving an account of that theory, it is best to begin with a fairly broad view. One can start by viewing it as a response to a Kantian paradox about the relation of freedom and human agency. The paradox is nicely stated by Pinkard: ‘...we seem to be both required not to have an antecedent reason for the legislation of any basic maxim [as that reason would then determine our action] and to have such a reason [otherwise our actions are arbitrary and hence non-agential]’.¹⁸ In order to consider myself free and self-determining, I must be able to legislate the maxim or rule that underwrites my action. I must have a reason for acting, since otherwise it seems that I am not an agent in the true sense of the word. But if that reason is given to me from the outside, as it were, then my reason for acting would not be self-determined; I would be determined by factors external to me. On the other hand, if such a maxim or rule could be generated by pure reason unaided by anything external to it, then for Kant, it ought to be something that any rational agent could affirm. Yet since it was generated by pure reason, it is a rule that the subject applies to itself. In determining myself according to such a rule, I am not only a self-determining being, but a being that has determined itself by rules that are universally valid, valid for all rational subjects. The rule would be universal, but still be spontaneously generated by the subject. Pinkard

¹⁸ T Pinkard, *German Philosophy: 1760-1860 The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, 2002) 226.

points out that, for Kant, such rules would be the product of a universal self-consciousness,¹⁹ a norm that ‘we’ all could find rationally binding, a norm that we could all share *qua* rational subjects. To flag the problem that I will deal with in detail, it would seem that, if I am to generate universal rules or maxims without referring to anything external to subjectivity, then I seem to be left with few resources for generating such rules or maxims. This problem was recognised by Kant’s peers and was a fundamental problem for those who came after Kant.

From the post-Kantian perspective, the problem is that the isolated rational subject – operating on the basis of pure reason²⁰ and completely unaided by any prior dependencies, social or natural²¹ – does not have the resources to generate or legislate such a maxim or rule.²² How does one issue a law to oneself that one could see as binding, through which one could regulate one’s conduct? This cannot be done in Kantian terms. It cannot be done from the point of view of an atomistic isolated subjectivity. If this question is to be answered, the Kantian perspective needs to be reorientated:²³ the subject must have a relation to actuality; it must have some relation to something beyond itself; it cannot be free from all dependencies. The question then becomes: what is the authority that determines whether these rules or maxims are adequate to the perspective of universal self-consciousness?²⁴ The concern is that the Kantian account places so much emphasis on the rationality or universality of the form of the maxims by which we act, and so little on the content, that any determinate content or maxim might be twisted so as to have the appearance of universal validity. Thus Hegel will claim ‘just as

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 225.

²⁰ Reason unaided by reference to empirical experience.

²¹ R Pippin, ‘What is the Question for which Hegel’s Theory of Recognition is the Answer?’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 8:2, 2000, 157.

²² While I think Kant can be saved from this ‘emptiness’ charge, I will not pursue that argument here. It is sufficient to say that, from the post-Kantian perspective, pure reason seems lacking in the resources to determine adequately any specific action.

²³ Pinkard, *op cit*, 227.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 225.

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subjectivity evaporates every content into itself, it may also in turn develop it out of itself²⁵ – arbitrarily, it would seem.

Certainly it would be problematic to assume that the isolated atomistic subject has the capacity to determine whether the maxims or rules for action at which it arrives through the process of reflection were universally binding or not. In that case, we run the risk of mistaking the parochial perspective for a universal one. As Hegel suggests, ‘self-consciousness is capable of making into its principle either *the universal in and for itself*, or the *arbitrariness of its own particularity*’.²⁶ From the Hegelian perspective, the Kantian subject has nothing against which its maxim can be tested apart from the criterion of formality. Because almost anything could be rendered formally valid, this is an inadequate criterion. Both of these claims – that the Kantian isolated subject lacks the resources to generate any determinate maxim and that the subject could twist the maxims into universal form – make the Kantian account problematic for many post-Kantian thinkers. But the crucial question here remains the broadly Kantian one about the nature and possibility of autonomous agency: in what sense can we take ourselves to be self-determining beings?²⁷ Thus, Robert Pippin points out that the question of recognition is, at least in part, ‘the question of the nature and the very possibility of freedom’.²⁸

The answer to this question is recognition, a process that brings one into ‘the right relation to [one’s] own deeds,’ such that I experience those deeds as being mine.²⁹ This requires a reorientation. The isolated subject of pure reason – the Kantian rational subject – has, on

²⁵ G W F Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge, 1998) §138, Addition (H), 166.

²⁶ *Ibid*, §139, 167, emphasis Hegel’s. For German equivalent see K Ilting, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie 1818-1831: Die Rechtsphilosophie von 1820* (Stuttgart, 1974) 492.

²⁷ Pinkard, *op cit*, 226.

²⁸ Pippin, *op cit*, 155.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 157.

the post-Kantian reading,³⁰ no resources to generate binding maxims that are applicable to concrete situations and so must refer to something other than pure reason.³¹ There must be a reference to something outside of Kantian reason; the subject must be in a relation to some kind of actuality that could underwrite what is legislated. The actions of an agent, if not arbitrary or lawless (and hence not free), must have their basis in a reason: there must be a reason for acting ‘thus’.³² Rather than set, as a condition of freedom, the requirement that the action not be based on anything external to pure reason, it is better to look to the quality of the reason on which the agent acts to see whether its determination is free.³³ Thus, the competence of the agent to articulate good reasons for acting in precisely the manner it does determines the extent to which it can see the action as stemming from its own activity and the extent to which it can see the action as free.³⁴ Again, the problem arises: how can the subject determine the strength or quality of its reason for acting?

The idea is that a good reason or maxim is one that other rational agents can affirm. The subject is still looking for a perspective that might be described as a universal self-consciousness: what other rational selves would do. This gives the subject some security about what it ought to do. What we can mutually affirm can be thought of as a perspective that we share, that is internal to us. What we affirm we ought to do. We have invoked the perspective of other rational

³⁰ Kant may be saved from this post-Kantian critique. While this is not possible to do so here, Hegel’s point is a generally accepted one. No matter how one might want to nuance Kant’s argument to save him from this critique, the problem challenges those who inherit the Kantian tradition. If grappling with the problem generates useful theoretical resources, we ought consider the way post-Kantian thinkers have dealt with it.

³¹ Here it is also important to note that, while the Kantian conception of rationality is a significant departure and critique of the kind of instrumental conception of rationality that animated mainstream Enlightenment accounts of reason, post-Kantian thinkers further reorient the Kantian approach. For a more complete account of this transformation in the notion of rationality, see PA Quadrio, ‘Art and Politics in the Systemprogramme’, 142-165

³² Pippin, *op cit*, p. 159.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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agents, other like-constituted beings, and it would seem unfair for the agent to say, ‘let my judgment stand in for the judgment of all rational agents’, because that runs the risk that the parochial individual will is mistaken for, or elevated to, the status of a single universal will. If the agent claims it to be rational, the action invokes the authority of others whom I recognise as having authority to judge, as able to see the action as the result of good reasons and to view the agent as someone who has the ability to act from reasons. In other words, in order mutually to recognise a reason as binding or authoritative, we must first mutually recognise each other. The recognition of the authoritative nature of a reason, that is, the constitution of a norm, is thus based in the recognitive act of our mutually according each other worth. Thus, as Pinkard claims: ‘[s]ince the agent cannot secure any bindingness for the principle simply on his own, he requires the *recognition* of another agent of it as binding on both of them. Each demands recognition from the other that the ‘law’ [or maxim] he enacts is authoritative (that is, *right*)’.³⁵ Insofar as the other agent does recognise my reason for acting as being good, that reason becomes authoritative. It becomes normative; it is something ‘we’ have seen as right or good. Thus the normative is based in a reciprocal intersubjective relation, the mutual affirmation that is the basis of the ‘we’.

The maxim or rule becomes ‘our’ maxim or rule, the way ‘we’ go about addressing this situation. It is not generated out of parochialism but through a universal perspective that is achievable only with another or others who affirm the rationality of the maxim. It is a perspective generated through mutual and reciprocal recognition. In this recognition of the other as like myself, I expand my perspective on the action to include their perspective. I recognise that they have a perspective on my actions and that their being rational means they have the authority to judge the rationality of my actions. But, if they are judging my action as an action, that is, something other than an event that takes place through natural necessity, then they are already viewing me as an agent, as one who determines their actions through reason, as a rational being like them with a perspective and an

³⁵ Pinkard, *op cit*, 227.

authority to judge the rationality of actions. Thus, through recognition, the universal perspective opens up: a universal self-consciousness. We see ourselves as 'like' each other in that we act for reasons.³⁶ We also realise that the binding nature of our reasons for action requires some kind of affirmation from a perspective other than our own. It requires the other. Norms are then the result of a social transaction that requires a universal self-consciousness, a 'we' or *Geist*. In that we can both affirm the rationality of those reasons, they become 'our' reasons. The 'we' takes on the possessive form and 'our' reason becomes the way we go about judging or acting. But if norms issue from *Geist*, in that Hegel identifies reason itself with *Geist*,³⁷ and if the 'existential phenomenological genesis'³⁸ of *Geist* is, as *per* Williams, the act of mutual and reciprocal recognition, then one is led to conclude that the existential genesis of *Geist*, the existential genesis of reason itself, is an intersubjective relation that has an organic, reciprocal structure.³⁹ Freedom, the capacity for self-determination through reasons or norms that I find authoritative, is, as such, an intersubjectively mediated phenomenon, a Spiritual phenomenon in the Hegelian sense that requires the organic mutuality and reciprocity of the recognitive relation.

Williams and the Four Dimensions of Recognition

The above account might suggest that we enter into recognitive relations for instrumental reasons, so that we can ensure that our reasons for acting are binding ones. But to leave it there misrepresents recognition theory. I will turn now to the work of Robert Williams, so as to add an ethical dimension to the above discussion. Drawing on Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* and from the

³⁶ This is not, however, a reduction of the other to the same. This is dealt with comprehensively in Williams, *op cit*, 53-59, 70-77 and 88-91.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 91

³⁸ *Ibid*.

³⁹ For an interesting discussion that draws out the reciprocal nature of Hegelian *Geist* so as to emphasise the reciprocity between elements bound up in a Spiritual relation, see R Brandom, 'Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism: Negotiation and Administration in Hegel's Account of the Structure and Content of Conceptual Norms', *European Journal of Philosophy* 7:2, 1999, 164-189.

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foundational work of Ludwig Siep, whose account of recognition served as an impetus for much of the contemporary discussion, Williams identifies four dimensions of recognition⁴⁰ which reinforce the connection between freedom and reciprocal recognition, as presented above, but from a different perspective. His perspective both deepens the positive or ethical side of the theory, orientating us to its qualitative dimensions. This provides an indication of what the recognitive relation is like, deepening the phenomenology of recognition by breaking the phenomena down into discrete moments. Understanding these dimensions provides a way of assessing the adequacy of a recognitive relation, since each dimension must be paid its due if that relation is to be adequate.

Siep's work was foundational for recognition theory, his *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktische Philosophie*⁴¹ of 1978 essentially initiating the contemporary interest in that theory. In what follows, Williams applies the theory to Siep's account of Hegel's concept of freedom, which does not explicitly address the issue of recognition.⁴² Within the context of a discussion of recognition, however, Williams' adaptation is in keeping with the spirit of Siep's work: they both hold that freedom is an intersubjectively mediated social accomplishment.⁴³ There are four distinct but interrelated dimensions that emerge from an understanding of Hegelian recognition theory: autonomy, union, self-overcoming and release (*freigabe*).⁴⁴ Each will be considered in turn.

1. Autonomy: this is linked with a release from natural causation, which points to a conception of the will as capable of self-determination, and hence, in principle, free from heteronomous causation, from external determination.⁴⁵ This is 'in principle' because, in saying that there is a release from natural or

⁴⁰ Williams, *op cit*, 80.

⁴¹ L Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktische Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes* (Freiburg, 1979).

⁴² Williams, *op cit*, 80.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 80-1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 80.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

heteronomous causation, it is not claimed that the will transcends nature in a dualistic or supernaturalist sense. The will, *qua* activity, is in a sense natural, just as we might say that other modes of human activity – walking for instance – are natural. In linking autonomy to a release from natural causation, we are saying that the will is not, to borrow from Pippin, ‘pushed and pulled by contingent desires and external pressure’.⁴⁶ Autonomy is a capacity for self-determination, although one that is not necessarily exercised. It has two moments: a negative one, whereby human volition can negate external determination or hold off from falling into any determinate shape, and a positive one, whereby human volition can actively take up a specific determination and allow itself to take on some determinate shape. The autonomous will is not, however, caught in a tension between the negative and the positive. These are two sides of the same coin. In order *actively to take up* a specific determination as mine, that is, something I have actively and rationally chosen (positive moment), I must, prior to that determination, be able to hold back from *passively falling into* any specific determination (negative moment). It is only when the two moments are brought together that autonomy, as self-determination, is achieved. Finally, despite Hegel’s belief that autonomy is a social achievement, something that has determinate social conditions that facilitate individual autonomy, there is a sense in which this dimension seems to have an egocentric orientation. This point aside, the qualitative importance of autonomy is that, if the recognitive relation is to be stable, it must be spontaneous and autonomous and not the result of external coercion.⁴⁷ For Hegel this is primarily because coercion negates freedom,⁴⁸ so that the relation achieved would not be enduring, but contingent, and would evaporate were the coercive threat removed.

2. Union/Association: to be in union in this sense is to be in relation with an ‘other’ where that other is not felt to be a limit to the self.⁴⁹ This does not imply the effacement of individuality, for difference

⁴⁶ Pippin, *op cit*, 157.

⁴⁷ Williams, *op cit*, 77-78.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 160-161.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 81.

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and limitation exist in union with the other, but are overcome and viewed as part of the union itself, as moments of the union.⁵⁰ Importantly, the German word *Vereinigung*, translated as ‘union’, can also be translated as ‘association’, a rendering that captures the idea that individuality is preserved in this union⁵¹ yet does not quite capture the integral nature of the term. Since union here is a self-constituting term, it is better to retain it, nuanced by the idea that the union does not constitute a monolithic undifferentiated entity. The union preserves the integrity of what is unified, but the unity itself constitutes a new relation, a new universal in which what is unified finds itself anew. Through this new relation, the elements unified can come to more complex—expanded—understandings of themselves. The relation is reciprocal and mutual. This notion of union can be understood through the Hegelian concept of ‘Love’.⁵² Crudely, this is a union in which conflict, opposition and estrangement are overcome, while difference is preserved.⁵³

Although Hegel’s account is complex, there is certainly a large degree of resonance between the dimension of recognition and freedom that we find in union and Hegel’s account of ‘Love’. In the dialectical union of love, self-relation and other-relation are unified, such that I come to myself more completely through my relation to the other and *vice-versa*; the nodes are not external to each other but each is internal to the other. This leads to one last point: through union, the subject is decentred. The other must count and does so in two ways: firstly, in being something like me to whom I ought to accord the same respect that I demand; and secondly, in mediating my sense of self through affirmation of my own worth. In the dimension of union there is a very important moment that is allocentric or other-centred, but which does not negate the subject. In union there is an opening out to the other that is simultaneously a return to the self, without which union cannot be achieved. Thus

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² I use the capital to warn the reader that this is a Hegelian term of art and cannot be taken as an equivalent of the common usage of that term.

⁵³ Williams, *op cit*, 81.

union is truly intersubjective. It is no mere aggregation of objects that are indifferent or external to each other, but is a union in which the other counts for me and I count for the other. Each is, in this sense, internal to the other.

It might seem as if the relation of union negatively impacts on autonomy, because the relationship between the elements unified seems to imply that they are mutually limiting. But this is not the case, as both Siep and Williams understand. The human being is always in relation. If autonomy could only be had by being free from all relation to others, then autonomy itself would be a chimera.⁵⁴ Once this is understood, discussions of autonomy must work within the fact of relation; we cannot be autonomous without relation because we cannot ‘be’ without relation. I take it as relatively uncontroversial that ‘being’ is a minimal condition of autonomy.⁵⁵ Yet, while there is no necessary contradiction between autonomy and union, their relation does, at first blush, appear paradoxical: they appear to pull in opposing directions. Autonomy seems to pull us towards self – it appears to be an egocentric movement – whereas union seems to pull us towards other – it appears to be an allocentric movement. The power of the theory of recognition is that it gives us a way to think through this paradox by seeing these two dimensions as being dialectically unified: autonomy requires relation, and relation, if it is to avoid falling into monolithic indifference, requires autonomy.

3. Self-overcoming: this follows from union since, through the relation to other, the self is expanded. Through its relation to the other, the subject is decentred and overcomes its parochial limitations. This decentring of the subject is a movement away from ‘I’ and towards the other. Most importantly, it is a movement towards the ‘we’, an expansion of the subject in the direction of community.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 81-2.

⁵⁵ Being is a condition for autonomy in that autonomy implies self-governance, the capacity for an agent to generate the rules by which they act, which itself implies being. I say this only to guard against the interpretation of autonomy as ‘freedom’. If we understand autonomy simply as freedom then we might be tempted, wrongly, to think that non-being is autonomy.

⁵⁶ Williams, *op cit*, 82-3.

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In opening out towards the other, I allow the other to count, seeing their perspective as important. Thus I allow their perspective to penetrate mine, to become internal to my own, enriching my perspective. This is what is meant by self-overcoming: the self overcomes its parochial limitations to expand in the direction of community. Through the self-overcoming that constitutes the ‘we’, the ‘I’ has a mode of self-relation. It can return to itself from a universal perspective, the perspective of the determinate intersubjectivity of the ‘we’⁵⁷ that enriches the perspective of the ‘I’. Thus the self-enrichment achieved through self-overcoming has different dimensions: it allows the other’s perspective to count for me and, in that it is reciprocal, it allows my perspective to count for the other. It allows for mutuality of perspective; it allows for the ‘we’. So again, there is a tension between two moments – one subject-orientated and one other-orientated. This is not an actual tension since, in that the two moments are dialectically unified in the ‘we’, they are two aspects of something unified, two faces of a single coin.

4. Release (*Freigabe*): there are two moments within this dimension of freedom and recognition: one negative and the other positive.⁵⁸ The negative moment is a renunciation or negation of any authoritative or paternalistic relation to the other. It is the negation of the pursuit of control.⁵⁹ The positive moment is the affirmation of the other *as other* in all its particularity, the affirmation of the other in their difference.⁶⁰ Taking these two moments of release together, we can describe this dimension as one whereby we give expression to our realisation that the other is an end in itself, a being who is rational⁶¹ and capable of setting its own ends, who demands my respect and whom I ought not try to control. Release affirms that the other counts, that their

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 84.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ Here rationality is taken in a minimal sense as simply the capacity to marshal ‘reasons’ which justify or support our actions, beliefs and attitudes; it concerns our capacity to give an account of ourselves. Thus a rational agent is one with whom I could engage discursively about their actions, beliefs and attitudes and who could engage me about mine.

perspective and contributions are valid. Williams tells us that this dimension of release is the consummation of reciprocal recognition and the birthplace of Spirit or *Geist*. It is a community of freedom that does not absorb or reduce individuals to a homogenous mass. It is not holistic, but rather presupposes, requires, accepts and preserves differences.⁶² This release of the other is not an indifference to the other, but a being at home with the other in all their difference.⁶³ Again, the two moments of release seem to pull in two different directions: the release is a 'giving of freedom to' the other, but this act of giving takes the form of a withdrawal from the other. It is not a complete withdrawal, but recognition that the other is a capable and autonomous being whom I ought to allow to go free, whom I ought to trust to express their own autonomy. It is not a withdrawal from relation but recognition of the dignity of the other, particularly the rational dignity of the other.

Williams explains that for Siep there is a tension between the dimension of self-overcoming and release.⁶⁴ Williams rejects the apparent tension, claiming that release is the external manifestation and expression of the dimension of self-overcoming, of the fact that I have overcome my parochial limits and expanded towards the other. Together these two dimensions represent the overcoming of egocentrism, the product of which is an opening towards the other while letting it be.⁶⁵ It is a recognition of the other as an end in itself, an other that counts, towards whom I have responsibilities. For Williams, these dimensions of freedom and recognition are not contradictory; they are necessary and complementary moments. Siep's point should not be rejected, however, without noting that there is at least an appearance of tension here: the two dimensions appear to be moving in different directions. The moment of self-overcoming is an expansive movement, out towards the other, an allocentric movement, whereas the dimension of release is a return to self and hence is egocentric. But, properly understood, there is no

⁶² Williams, *op cit*, 84.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

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tension: the movement is dialectical, a self-overcoming. It is in fact an opening out towards the other that simultaneously allows us to step back from the other in non-interference. It is an opening out towards the other in its difference. The paradox or tension between these two moments only operates at the surface level. One of the benefits of a theory of recognition is that it facilitates our thinking through such tensions, thinking through the felt paradox. In the same sense, the tension between the dimension of union and the dimension of autonomy is not an actual tension but rather a movement towards relation in which we are able to step more fully into ourselves. In my view, these four moments constitute two complementary pairs; within each pair, there is a seemingly paradoxical relation, for the two terms seem to have opposing momentums.

For Williams the dimensions of self-overcoming and release also reveal the nature of the dimension of union. This union does not imply the subsumption of the elements unified into an undifferentiated unity. The union preserves the particularity of the elements unified⁶⁶ in all their difference. In this kind of union, release is mutual or reciprocal. Further, none of this is hostile to autonomy since, while it may be intelligible or perhaps logically possible to think of a human being free of all relation, it is relatively uncontroversial that, despite this logical possibility, such a being is a practical impossibility. No such being ever has or ever will exist.⁶⁷ A human being must, via practical if not logical necessity, be in some kind of relation to an other, be it another subject or even simply a relation to spatio-temporal objects. In what kind of relation to an other could the human being be which is not hostile to its autonomy? Such a union would have the features of self-overcoming, the opening towards the other that expands and enriches the self, and also of mutual release, whereby the other is allowed to be. It is a relation

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 84-5.

⁶⁷ Indeed it might be suggested that relation is part of the very concept of the human being and that, at a minimum, all human beings need: a) a context into which they emerge, and b) some being from which they emerge (a mother). A concept of a human being that does not implicitly or explicitly acknowledge these essential relations seems to provide an insufficient analysis of what it is to be a human being. We could say that the notion of an unrelated human being is unintelligible.

whereby we affirm the other in their difference from ourselves. This is the recognitive relation.

Thus the four dimensions of freedom and recognition harmonise. The tensions between them are not hostile, but rather inform and fulfil each other. Recognition is the self-constituting unity of an intersubjective relation that enriches the *relata* by giving them a universal frame of reference, a universal mode of self-relation and a universal self-consciousness. This account brings out the ethical nature of the recognitive relation. While it is clear that this kind of intersubjective social relation is not the result of fear of violence, but rather the result of an act on the part of the subject that has cognitive and practical significance, neither is it the result of instrumental reasoning. Rather it seems to be the result of a capacity to think particularity under universals. It is the result of the subject's capacity to see the other as like oneself in a formal and abstract sense, without negating their difference. It is to see ourselves as not merely two juxtaposed particulars, an aggregation of objects that are indifferent to each other, but as a community, having something common that we can mutually affirm. Recognition provides an account of relation where universal relation is based in something intersubjective.

This account of recognition theory provides a more concrete way of understanding the notion of the relational organism. In particular it gives us an account of the specific type of relation that we find in the relational organism: it is a Spiritual or recognitive relation. The relational organism is a self-constituting unity wherein the parts and the whole, and the parts between themselves, are bound in mutual or reciprocal relations. Each element could be informed by and reciprocally inform, and be transformed by and reciprocally transform, the perspective of every other element. Thus an element cannot be viewed as parochial or isolated, for it is enriched by and enriches the other. In the relational organism, each element transcends its own parochial limitations, expanding its perspective in such a way as to affirm the perspectives of others. It is a unity wherein no element dominates others but rather releases the others to make their own contribution to the unity according to their own capacity for self-determination. It is a relation that affirms the other

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as co-constitutive of the self and affirms the self as the co-constitutive of the other. The reason why the relational organism is characterised by recognitive relations is that recognition itself has an organic reciprocal structure. A theory of organic relations is the ontological complement to the phenomenon of the recognitive relation. The former describes the structure of the latter. Insofar as recognition constitutes the ‘existential phenomenological genesis’⁶⁸ of *Geist*, we can say that *Geist* is born from the organic relation between mutually recognising subjects. Further, since recognition constitutes, according to Williams, the ‘substance of every essential Spirituality’,⁶⁹ we are also led to acknowledge that *Geist* itself has an organic structure. It too is a self-constituting, non-dominating unity bound by mutual and reciprocal recognition.

The Organic Nature of *Geist*

When it comes to considerations of Objective *Geist*, the claims of the preceding section do not seem controversial. Williams’ work, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*,⁷⁰ demonstrates the connection between recognitive relations and the norms and practices of cultural and institutional life. If it is true, as has been suggested, that organicism is the ontological/structural complement of the phenomenon of mutual recognition in the sphere of ‘Objective *Geist*’, and if it were true, as Williams suggests, that recognition is the ‘existential phenomenological genesis’⁷¹ of *Geist*, then the idea that Objective *Geist* has an organic structure follows. Yet in order to support the claim that *Geist* itself has an organic structure, some consideration must be given to Subjective and Absolute *Geist*. Whilst a complete substantiation of that claim is beyond the confines of this paper it would be remiss not to indicate its general direction. I end the paper by turning to a direct consideration of the organic nature of Hegelian *Geist*.

⁶⁸ Williams, *op cit*, 91.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 91.

Before considering Objective, Subjective and Absolute *Geist*, it is worth pausing to consider the way the contemporary Hegel specialists understand *Geist* in general. In his account of the nature of *Geist*, Stephen Houlgate makes the following claim: '[S]pirit, is self-conscious reason that relates to an other, whom it recognises also to be self-conscious reason, and who recognises the first in turn as such reason. Spirit, therefore, takes the form of a community of reciprocal recognition'.⁷² Here the term 'recognition' helps to give phenomenological content to a reciprocal, co-constituting, organic structure. This structure is one wherein the elements are mutually determining or co-constituting; Houlgate's citations of Hegel identify the way the elements within this community of reciprocal recognition gain their self-certainty through their relation to the other elements.⁷³ It is particularly significant that this structure is a community, taken in the everyday sense as implying a social group unified by something common or, in the less everyday and more abstract sense as a collection of interdependent elements.⁷⁴ Houlgate's comments are meant as an abstract account of *Geist*,⁷⁵ so the latter understanding of community is perhaps the more appropriate. Thus, we are led to the idea that Spirit is a collection of interdependent elements, bound up in relations of mutual and reciprocal determination and constitution. The elements interpenetrate and are mutually informing and transforming, and, furthermore, the phenomenological character of such relations is recognitive. With this understanding, we can now turn to consider the way that the recognitive relation is expressed in Objective, Subjective and Absolute *Geist*.

Objective *Geist* relates to the norms and practices of our customary and institutional life, that is, the norms, practices and customs, written and unwritten, that animate the movement of human social life. If

⁷² S Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History* (Oxford, 2005) 78.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 78-9.

⁷⁴ J Pearsall, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford, 1998) 371c.

⁷⁵ Houlgate, *op cit.*, 78-80.

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considered as a unity, it is the self-constituting unity⁷⁶ of our customary and institutional life. Clearly the elements within this unity are not mutually recognising *per se*, but it is also clear that they are not merely a collection of isolated elements aggregated together. The elements within that unity are in fact mutually conditioning, mutually informing and transforming. Consider the specific norms related to setting a dining table and the way that these norms are orientated by broader and more general social norms, norms which are themselves given content by such specific practices as table setting. Or consider the way road rules express our broader norms and values whilst simultaneously orientating our specific practice of driving according to those broad norms. We could also consider that subset of social conventions or norms known as language. What would it be for such a set of norms to be mutually informing and transforming? It would simply mean that each element becomes something determinate only in its relation to the other elements of that set, elements which in turn and reciprocally helps to make determinate. The norms and institutions of our customary and institutional life are not indifferent to each other; they are not isolated elements, but they are mutually and reciprocally conditioning, elements that always point beyond themselves.

Subjective *Geist* can be thought along similar lines. If Subjective *Geist*, or individual psychological or mental life, is considered as a unity that has an organic structure, then the various elements of such a unity are bound in relations that are mutual and reciprocal. In particular, the elements within that unity have a mutual or reciprocal co-constituting relationship with one another. If the elements of individual mental life display this organic structure, then we could substantiate our claim in this regard. But what would it mean for the elements of individual mental life to have such a structure? It would mean that the elements of human mental life are not indifferent to one another in a causal sense. If the human being learns something new, or undergoes a certain experience or is affected by a certain mood,

⁷⁶ That this is a self-constituting unity seems supported by the fact that the ground of any social convention or norm seems to be discursive agreement, which itself implies social convention.

this will ramify through their mental life to a greater or lesser degree. My thought or belief that ‘today it is hot and dry’ and my thought or belief that ‘today is Friday’ are not thoughts that are indifferent to each other, even if they are abstractly separable. This might be confirmed by asking me what the weather was like on Friday, to which I reply ‘hot and dry’. My mental life is not simply an aggregate of discrete or atomic parcels that exist alongside whilst being indifferent to one another; rather it is a unity of interpenetrating and co-constituting elements. These elements of my mental life are not necessarily mutually recognising elements, for that would be to anthropomorphise them, but, in that the relation between the elements is one of reciprocal or mutual determination, it evidences the same structural features as are found in the recognitive relation: organic structures.

Absolute *Geist* can be described as *Geist*’s or reason’s own self-consciousness, of which we can identify three different manifestations: art, religion and philosophy. Each of these is a different mode through which reason can become conscious of itself – in which case we can say that the whole – or better, the unity – to which Absolute *Geist* refers, is the unity of self-conscious reason. Restricting ourselves to that manifestation of Absolute *Geist* that we refer to as philosophy, we can say that philosophy is the medium in which reason can know itself as such and, most importantly, the medium through which reason can come to consciousness of the necessity that lies within its own self-actualisation in history, the historical necessity of what is. Thus in understanding the history of philosophy as the unfolding or self-actualisation of reason’s own self-consciousness, we can understand the relation between elements of this process as an organic relation. In his article, ‘Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel’s Idealism’,⁷⁷ Robert Brandom provides important clues as to how we might understand this process as occurring across history. He talks in terms of recognition, but it is easy to see the organic structure within his discussion. Brandom’s example relates to the decision of judges in regards to common law:

⁷⁷ R Brandom, *op cit*, 164-189.

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Past applications of concepts (decisions of cases) exercise an authority over future ones. For they supply the precedents that constitute the only rationales available to justify future decisions. They are the source of the content of the concepts later judges are charged with applying ... But reciprocally, later applications of concepts by judges who inherit the tradition exercise an authority over the earlier ones. For the significance of the authority of the tradition, what conceptual content exactly it is taken to have instituted, is decided by the judges currently making decisions ... What the norm *really* is (what it is *in* itself) is the product of the recognitive *negotiation* between these two poles of reciprocal authority (what the content is *for* the past judges and what it is *for* the present one) ... The current judge administers the norms instituted and determined by past applications. But who is there to hold the current judge responsible to the tradition of prior applications, to assess the fidelity of her decision to the content actually conferred on the legal concepts by the tradition she inherits? ... The current judge is held to accountable to the tradition she inherits by the judges yet to come.⁷⁸

This analysis gives us a way of understanding the institution and administration of norms across time as the negotiation between temporal poles of reciprocal authority. The norm penetrates and is penetrated by past and future applications and understandings of it. This provides us a way of understanding the history of philosophy which, according to Hegel, is the history of reason coming to full self-knowledge, a process of reciprocal, interpenetrating, negotiations or relations across time. Descartes does not fall out of the sky fully formed; his thoughts are shaped by philosophers of the past, whose thoughts he in turn shapes in his very interpretation of them. Of course he is not the final authority on the meaning of the tradition that precedes him; we have some authority here too. But note that our way of understanding the past, whilst it might reject Descartes' own understanding of that past, is an understanding that has itself been shaped by Descartes' understanding and which in turn shapes the way that future thinkers will understand him. There is an organic relation between the nodes; they are mutually informing and transforming.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 180-181.

Conclusion

Thus we can see that, whether it is expressed in the individual mental life of a subject, in the social rationality of a community or ultimately in that community's highest modes of self-relation (religion, art and philosophy), Hegelian *Geist* has an organic structure. That organic structure is a relational rather than a holistic organicism, wherein both the whole and the parts, and the parts amongst themselves, are bound up in relations that are mutually and reciprocally conditioning and determining. Those working on Hegel's social theory have given an account of such relations in terms of recognition theory and have not attempted to connect that theory to Hegel's organicism. In this paper, we have seen that the relational organicism that we find in Hegel's social theory is animated by a specifically recognitive relationship, giving the organic structure a phenomenal form. Hegel's social and political theory, which is the core of his philosophy of Objective *Geist*, presents us with a relational organicism: the structure of Objective *Geist* is organic. We may extend this account beyond the sphere of Objective *Geist* to feed into an account of *Geist* in general. *Geist* is constituted by relations of reciprocity and mutuality wherein its elements become mutually or reciprocally constituting or determining. Thus, while for the sake of an understanding of Hegel's social and political theory, we can say that the relations that can be found in the relational organic society are recognitive relations, we can also say that these relations are truly 'Spiritual' relations in the Hegelian sense: they are relations that evidence the organic structure that is displayed at all levels of *Geist*. They are dynamic relations of mutual or reciprocal determination.

