CONTESTING RECOGNITION: A CRITIQUE OF HEGELIAN THEORIES OF RECOGNITIVE FREEDOM

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Introduction

In recent years, political theory has seen a resurgence of interest in the theme of intersubjective and intercultural recognition. Buttressed by a shift in Hegel scholarship marked by Robert R. William’s 1997 book, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition*¹, the Hegelian notion of mutual recognition has filtered into problems surrounding both the normative foundations of social theory and multiculturalism. Axel Honneth, in his 1995 book *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, argues that mutual recognition functions as the moral center of social interaction, thus transforming the “struggle for recognition” into a pivotal concept of social theory. Alternately, Charles Taylor’s celebrated 1992 essay, “The Politics of Recognition,” affords the concept a decisive role in negotiating between procedural liberalism and multiculturalism. Mutual recognition thus appears to be a versatile concept indeed: it is invoked for diverse purposes, from the reconstruction of social ontology to a basic cultural ethic.

If mutual recognition is called upon to play these various roles, it is likely because of two sets of challenges encountered by attempts to give a substantive, ethical vision of “the good life” an important place in politics. On the one hand, procedural versions of liberalism, of which John Rawls’ theory of justice provides the most prominent example, often argue that privileging any substantive vision of the good life in politics threatens basic political liberties. On the other hand, both strong social ontologies and procedural liberalism face more radical criticism from “postmodern” theorists, who tend to criticize

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¹ Alexandre Kojève already emphasized the struggle for recognition in his 1934 *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*. As Williams notes, however, Kojève’s explication of Hegel’s concept of recognition is limited to the lord/bondsman dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Consequently it does not show, in William’s reading, the importance of recognition to Hegel’s philosophy as a whole, especially his later works such as *The Philosophy of Right*. See Robert R. Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 10-13.
strong ethical ideas of political life as generated at base by repressive power relations. By navigating between the Scylla of procedural liberalism and the Charybdis of postmodernism, theories of mutual recognition appear to provide a new foundation for incorporating ethical substance into political communities beyond only a commitment to procedural constraints.

By emphasizing the way that identity is constituted through webs of intersubjective relationships, recognition indeed seems well-equipped to challenge some of the more atomistic tendencies of liberalism. It should be recalled, however, that in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the text that many contemporary theories of recognition hearken back to, mutual recognition functions not simply as the guarantor of multicultural justice or the central analytic for social ontology (though this latter is certainly one of Hegel’s considerations); rather, recognition is tied most closely to the question of freedom. An individual is free, in Hegel’s analysis, when he or she is recognized as free and on an equal plane with other subjects in political society, and when he or she reciprocally recognizes these other individuals. While theories of recognition represent a formidable challenge to methodological individualism in social and political theory—a challenge which, in my view, should not be abandoned—it is my contention that both the Hegelian idea of recognition and its contemporary versions fail to grasp some important elements of political freedom. In this thesis, I will argue that theories of recognition overemphasize the role of shared social or cultural horizons in constituting human freedom, thereby treating freedom as primarily a process of acceptance—recognition, in another sense of the term—of those horizons rather than the
practice of criticizing them. Though born in dialectical social theory, mutual recognition tends to blunt the negative, critical edge of its original formulation in Hegel.

This misunderstanding of freedom is based, I will argue, upon a related misunderstanding of the nature of difference. In addressing the relation between particularity and universality, or the relation between an individual and the shared backgrounds within which he or she is situated, theories of recognition rely on a model of difference that I will call “genus/species difference.” This model of difference has its roots in Book X of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle notes that “the difference of a thing from that from which it differs in species, must be a contrariety; and this belongs only to the things that are in the same genus.”

For Aristotle, things that are different cannot be “merely other,” but must first be similar in some fashion in order to be distinguished from one another. Similarity in the genus—the universal—grounds difference in the species—the particular. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to challenge this theory of difference at its root, I will argue that it results in serious misunderstandings when applied to questions of social and cultural identity.

Genus/species difference tends to treat particular cultural differences as if they are stable subdivisions of a higher genus, that of general human dignity; thus Gilles Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition*, calls such Aristotelian models of difference “sedentary,” comparing them to agricultural land divided up into different, precisely demarcated plots. By relying on this concept of difference, and thus treating particular identities as stable within shared social frameworks, theories of recognition risk misrecognizing the

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ways that particular individuals and groups struggle to differentiate themselves from established horizons of recognition.

Ironically, it was Hegel who perhaps most powerfully challenged the profound quietude of this model of difference. His dialectical method understands difference to be elaborated only through negativity and antagonism: particular identities are only articulated through precarious struggles against their opposites. Thus in the famous lord/bondsman dialectic, in which the concept of recognition is first introduced, the lord and bondsman must engage in a “life-and-death struggle” so that each may assert his self-certainty. The first chapter of this thesis will be devoted to examining precisely this struggle in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. It will be argued, however, that the negative, critical moment of freedom that defines the lord/bondsman dialectic vanishes in Hegel’s account of the culmination of Objective Spirit in the State, described in *The Philosophy of Right*. Hegel, by reinstituting the genus/species model of difference in the form of Spirit, or *Geist*, dividing itself up into particular forms, betrays his best intuitions about the risks and uncertainties that accompany the struggle for recognition.

Similar problems accompany Charles Taylor’s account of recognition, which is the topic of the second chapter. While Taylor attempts to mitigate some of the difficulties of Hegel’s theory, such as Hegel’s reliance upon the metaphysical idea of *Geist*, I contend that Taylor’s theory of recognition is formally quite similar to Hegel’s. His model of agency is founded upon the subject’s recognition of the “inescapable frameworks” of certain moral goods that shape human action. These moral goods then form the foundation for the recognition of different cultures—recognition consists of respect for a moral good that is different than our own. However, just as Hegel’s
understanding of recognition tends toward unity, so Taylor also portrays cultural goods as coherent wholes that are ultimately similar to one another. By treating diverse moral goods in such an abstract way, he risks ignoring the multiplicity of possibly conflicting interpretations of these goods that give rise to unstable particular differences within those cultures. Correlatively, Taylor treats individual agency as a process of acceptance of the broader moral and cultural backgrounds that shape one’s identity. Though he tries to capture the way that recognition shapes identity and agency, Taylor ends up overemphasizing the generic, shared nature of the moral goods that are recognized and thus again undermining the critical, dialectical possibilities for freedom.

In the third and final chapter of the thesis, I turn to Theodor Adorno’s work to flesh out this critique of theories of recognition more fully and to begin to articulate an alternative. For Adorno, freedom cannot be cleansed of its negative, critical moment. Particular identities—whether this means the identities of individuals or of particular cultures—though always related to broader, shared horizons of recognition, are restless within those frameworks. Indeed, for Adorno it is only due to the homogenizing tendencies of a bourgeois society defined by the triumph of instrumental reason that these generic backgrounds are taken to be constitutive of individual freedom. In contrast, Adorno reintroduces a dialectical edge into the genus/species model of difference, showing how the two sides of this model are necessarily in tension with one another. This dialectical tension points to the need to continually criticize the conventional ways in which we recognize other individuals and cultures. It follows that an adequate concept of freedom should incorporate this practice of criticism that gives the individual the necessary distance from an integrative society to articulate her identity on her own terms.
On the cultural level, Adorno’s negative dialectics allows us to criticize instances in which an abstract, unified identity is imposed upon a culture that is more complex and internally differentiated.

In articulating this critique, it is not my intention—or pretension—to sound the death knell of theories of freedom that rest upon mutual recognition. Rather, I wish to show that theories of recognition can benefit from dialectically destabilizing the genus/species model of difference that continues to shape the way that they treat particular difference. By incorporating Adorno’s critique, recognitive freedom can point the way toward a more powerful framework for overcoming oppressive cases of misrecognition in political society. The “immanent critique,” to borrow Adorno’s term, of mutual recognition does not destroy the possibility of recognition, but redeems it, and the possibilities for critical freedom along with it.
Masters, Slaves, and Sovereigns: Hegel’s Concept Mutual Recognition

Introduction

The concept of mutual recognition makes its first and most dramatic appearance in G.W.F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, recognition appears as the struggle between two self-consciousnesses seeking to establish their freedom. Self-consciousness, having just emerged from the internal epistemological journey through sense certainty, perception, and understanding, now encounters the outside world as dynamic field of interaction rather than an object of contemplation. In “The Truth of Self-Certainty” and “Lordship and Bondage” sections of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes self-consciousness’s confrontation with this dynamic flux of life, and later with another self-consciousness. The picture that emerges from Hegel’s dialectic of self-certainty is one of equal, reciprocal recognition between two consciousnesses, along with the incipient notion of the unity of the “I” and the “We” in a free political community. My intention in this section is not to give a full reading of this dialectic, which is too complex to do justice to here, but to bring out the basic qualities of mutual recognition in the Hegelian system. In the first part of this chapter, I will analyze the beginning stages of the dialectic of self-certainty, focusing on the process of Desire through which the subject first engages with external reality. The purpose of this section is to bring some of the major features of Hegel’s theory of recognition into sharper relief. In the second part, I will move from this initial description of self-certainty to an analysis of the first stage of the dialectic of mutual recognition: the famous struggle between the lord and the bondsman. Finally, I will connect this dialectic to a description of subjective freedom that occurs
much later in Hegel’s work: the section of *The Philosophy of Right* entitled “The Power of the Sovereign.” The connections drawn in this final section are intended to bring out some tensions in Hegel’s account, tensions that I will explore more fully later on through an examination of Theodor Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics. Broadly speaking, I will maintain that there are two conflicting accounts of recognition in Hegel’s work. One account focuses on the precarious and intensely negative struggle of the bondsman to achieve independence in the face of both the master and the material world. Here, freedom is achieved through an uncertain and difficult process by which the bondsman liberates himself from the damaging misrecognition afforded to him by the master. This focus on the critical, antagonistic side of the struggle for freedom is taken up most powerfully by Adorno’s negative dialectics. The second account, exemplified in my reading by Hegel’s concept of the sovereign in *The Philosophy of Right*, purges freedom of the traces of the antagonistic journey of the bondsman and treats liberation as the acceptance or recognition of a preexisting rational law. This side of Hegel is one that, I will argue, persists in Charles Taylor’s account of recognition. I will conclude that the former side is not only a better description of the struggle for freedom, but also that it remains truer to the demands of Hegel’s dialectical method than the latter side, which, in my view, artificially resolves this dialectic.

**Confronting Nature: Recognition in the Dialectic of Self-Certainty**

At the beginning of the dialectic of self-certainty, consciousness encounters the world as an extension of itself. After maneuvering through the difficult terrain of sense-certainty, perception, and understanding, it has come to comprehend that the knowing process
itself, rather than an independent existent, is in fact the object of knowledge. Its new task in the process of knowing will be to return to itself and to assert itself as independent, a distinct entity: “in point of fact self-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from otherness.” From the beginning of the dialectic, we are given a picture of consciousness as the restless striving after unity and certainty, the need to retreat from otherness back into the repose of stable selfhood. Hegel’s justification for this presupposition seems to be epistemological: the previous section of the Phenomenology, on non-self-reflexive consciousness, ended with consciousness’s implicit independence from the object and return to itself. We will have an opportunity to question this move, as well as the fundamental presupposition of a need for self-certainty, later on. For now, it suffices to note that in order to achieve self-certainty, consciousness must return to itself from that which initially appears as alien, thus surpassing otherness: “In this sphere, self-consciousness exhibits itself as the movement in which this antithesis is removed, and the identity of itself with itself becomes explicit for it.”

What initially serves as the “other” to self-consciousness is organic life, which appears in two opposed forms: the simple, universal flow of undifferentiated existence, and the constant irruption and diremption of independent forms within life. Within the ghostly procession of images that is the flux of life, forms of creatures, objects, and human beings materialize from the mist, only to pass away once again. Simultaneously, this passing-away seems to establish Life as an enduring existence of its own, a continual process distinct from its independent forms: “Life in the universal fluid medium, a

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5 Ibid
passive separating-out of the shapes becomes, just by so doing, a movement of those shapes or becomes Life as a process. The simple universal fluid medium is the in-itself, and the difference of the shapes is the other.” These two sides of Life can be unified only in self-consciousness, which has the ability to understand Life, in Hegel’s terminology, both as abstract genus and particular species. Self-consciousness perceives Life as an infinitely restless unity, a pure process, but it can and does also encounter and grasp its specific forms.

For Hegel, the first way that self-consciousness encounters the independent forms of life and comes to understand their unity in the overall genus is through Desire. Desire, as a process, mirrors the turbulent movement of life. When encountering an object, the desiring self-consciousness consumes it, attempting to negate its independence: “it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner.” This initial process, however, is seen to be an infinite regress. Once desiring self-consciousness has negated the object, it lapses again into the realm of doubt and uncertainty, and requires yet another object for consumption. In continually negating the independent forms of life, self-consciousness has temporarily identified itself with the process of Life as a whole, but it has not achieved self-certainty. This is because self-consciousness is driven by two contradictory imperatives: the need to negate the other, and the need for the other to remain, to be preserved, as a constant reference point for self-consciousness. The contradiction between these two demands sets up one of the key moves in Hegel’s dialectic of recognition. The existence of another self-consciousness is

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6 Ibid, s. 171, p. 107
7 Ibid, s. 174, p. 109
seen to be the only thing satisfying both of these conditions. This is because the other self-consciousness “is in its own self negation, and in being so is at the same time independent, it is consciousness.”\textsuperscript{8} Self-consciousness needs the reference point of another self-consciousness who can actively sanction the original self-consciousness’s independence. The two conditions of self-certainty are thus only met when the other self-consciousness both negates itself and recognizes the original self as free, and vice versa.

The possibility of self-certainty, i.e. the independence of consciousness as a free subject, relies upon mutual recognition between self-consciousnesses. More specifically, it relies upon recognizing the Other \textit{qua} self-consciousness, or recognizing him or her under the concept of a self-negating for-itself. The self-consciousness recognized is not a singular individual, but is rather the \textit{genus}: “it is \textit{for itself} a genus, a universal fluid element in the peculiarity of its own separate being; it is a living self-consciousness.”\textsuperscript{9} This contains, embryonically, the possibility of mutual recognition culminating in the “Notion of Spirit”: “What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.”\textsuperscript{10} The dialectic of mutual recognition ends in self-certainty and independence for each consciousness, but only insofar as consciousness becomes reconciled with Spirit, or the ‘We’.

Hegel rightly calls this moment a “turning-point” in the dialectic of self-consciousness, for it is here that the self first encounters an embryonic idea of \textit{Geist}, or Spirit. Hegelian \textit{Geist}, which can be understood broadly as the identity of the rational and

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, s. 175, p. 110
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, s. 176, p. 110
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid, s. 177, p. 110
the actual, or the point at which reason fully flourishes and comprehends its identity with reality, is that which gives substance to the community of mutually recognized equals. In an important sense, *Geist* is the real actor in Hegel’s dialectical drama. It is that ubiquitous, restless force, always negating itself then returning to itself, that acts as the motor for the realization of freedom in history. Self-consciousness has become reconciled when it has achieved a community founded upon mutual recognition and fully understood why such a community is constitutive of its freedom. Hegel will later articulate the realization of *Geist* in the “I” that is “We” as the ethical substance of the State in *The Philosophy of Right*. We are given the first real example of the process of mutual recognition that culminates in the political state in the dialectic of the lord and the bondsman.

Before proceeding to this famous section, however, it would be useful to highlight some of the most important features of this initial dialectic of recognition. There are two in particular that deserve comment. First, that which is initially recognized in the other self-consciousness is that individual’s character as *universality*. Self-consciousness requires the presence of another consciousness due to its quality of “absolute negation,” or that which performs the life-process of negation itself. This process, however, was seen to be associated with Life as a whole, as abstract genus, over and above any of the individual forms that life creates and dirempts. The first object of recognition, consequently, is self-consciousness as *abstract genus*, rather than the Other as a particular identity. Second, and in contrast, for Hegel, the process of recognition aims at preserving individual identities within this abstract genus. Thus, as noted before, in the identity of “I” and “We,” “independent self-consciousnesses…enjoy perfect freedom and
independence.” A second object of recognition is therefore the particular identity of the other self-consciousness qua universal, that is, the particular way in which that individual fits into the abstract genus of Geist.\footnote{I follow Robert R. Williams’ interpretation in Hegel’s *Ethics of Recognition* in taking the idea of the free political state to be, for Hegel, the realization of the process of recognition. This hermeneutic move is certainly controversial. It is in many ways an open question whether Hegel intended mutual recognition to simply be the process by which the State comes to be realized (the discussion of property in *The Philosophy of Right*, for instance, undoubtedly employs a concept of recognition similar to that expressed in the *Phenomenology*), or the final embodiment of freedom. In either case, it seem to me justified to focus on the dynamic of mutual recognition for at least two reasons. First, it is the aspect of Hegel’s work that seems to be most influential in contemporary political thought, either in emancipatory political thought (Axel Honneth) or theories of multiculturalism (Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka). Second, the tension between the two sides of recognition just noted—the universal and the particular—remains one of the central conflicts in Hegel’s thought.}

For Hegel, these two sides of recognition are dialectically related. The universal, or the substance of the political community as the “We” that unites distinct individuals, can only be realized through its particular moments. This process, however, has an implicit direction. Self-consciousness both begins and ends with a need for self-certainty, that is, the need to return to itself from otherness, thus establishing its independence. The goal of recognition is to provide an avenue for that independence, and as such what is recognized in the Other at first is not his or her particular identity but his or her status as a self-negating universal, as, effectively, a representative of Geist. At the beginning of the dialectic of mutual recognition, particularity seems to be subordinated to universality due to self-consciousness’s demand for self-certainty. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will suggest that this tendency persists well beyond the initial stages of mutual recognition. Even in Hegel’s free political community, particular identity is respected only insofar as it can be harmonized with the universality of Geist. The “I” is nothing without the “We,” in Hegel’s analysis, or so I will argue. It is the demand of Hegel’s framework that individual identity be seen as an extension of a universal identity that, in
my view, results in a schism between the particular stages of Hegel’s dialectic and its end-point. I will now begin to explore this schism with reference to the first stage of mutual recognition: the lord/bondsman dialectic.

**Confronting the Other: Recognition in the Dialectic of Lord and Bondsman**

Hegel is at least clear on one thing: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.”\(^\text{12}\) Self-consciousness is incomplete, and thus also unfree, when it exists outside of intersubjective relationships. In the history of self-consciousness that Hegel presents, however, it is impossible to jump from the need for recognition straight to realized freedom. Self-consciousness must pass through a number of inadequate stages prior to achieving reconciliation with *Geist*. The first and best-known of these stages is the struggle between the lord and bondsman.

At the beginning of this section, Hegel gives a description of the process of recognition in broad outline. Self-consciousness, ultimately desiring to return to the full certainty of itself, must overcome the Other whose recognition it requires. The result is that both self-consciousnesses use the Other as a sort of relay, a mirror through which to properly glimpse their own selfhoods, and after the liberating gaze is broken each “lets the other again go free.”\(^\text{13}\) Prior to this, however, each self-consciousness, seeking the repose of self-certainty, tries radically to negate the otherness of the other, resulting in a “life-and-death struggle.” This struggle is seen to be self-defeating, for the death of the other would get self-consciousness nowhere—it would destroy rather than maintain a

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\(^{12}\) *Phenomenology*, s. 178, p. 111

\(^{13}\) Ibid, s. 181, p. 111
possible source of recognition. Because of this, the triumphant self-consciousness compromises by enslaving the Other, creating a situation of unequal recognition:

[T]heir reflection into a unity has not yet been achieved [and] they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman.14

This asymmetrical relationship sets the stage for a surprising reversal. The lord at first appears as the realization of self-consciousness, independent and free. He is related to the bondsman only through the mediation of thinghood: both the particular objects that the bondsman fashions for the lord, and the chain that keeps the bondsman in his servitude. The bondsman, consequently, cannot free himself from “specific existence,” but in his bondage continues to labor on it at the whims of the lord. His self-consciousness is not free, but has instead remained trapped in the cycle of Desire that both lord and bondsman initially wished to escape: the continual consumption and reproduction of objects. The recognition that the lord receives from the bondsman is therefore only a degraded form of recognition that cannot form the foundation of the lord’s true self-certainty:

But for recognition proper the moment is lacking, that what the lord does to the other he also does to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself he should also do to the other. The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal. [192.] In this recognition the unessential consciousness is for the lord the object, which constitutes the truth of his certainty of himself.15

In keeping the bondsman shackled to the particular existence of things, the lord also finds himself to exist in a state of dependence: the bondsman’s chain becomes his own.

14 Ibid, s. 189, p. 115
15 Ibid, s. 191-192, p. 116
The bondsman, on the other hand, comes to experience his own freedom. As yet unaware of the implicit truth of his self-consciousness, the bondsman is continually confronted with the possibility of his own death at the hands of the lord.

For this consciousness has been fearful, not 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 fiber of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations.\(^{16}\)

It would be useful to linger for a bit on this important passage. The lord, having understood himself as dependent upon the slave, has become chained to the particular existence of things. The bondsman has the opposite experience. Facing the possibility of his own death, the absolute dissolution of existence, he is brought back to the negativity of self-consciousness that was implicit in the process of Desire. The encounter with death, however, seems to be a strange starting point for the path to self-certainty. The fact that human existence is bounded by death would seem to be an inescapable obstacle to self-certainty, one that in fact tethers us to particular existence rather than freeing us from it. If “everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations” for the bondsman, then it is because in his situation he is entirely exposed to the contingency and particularity of existence: he has come to comprehend his irremediable finitude. The arbitrary whims of the lord may bring about his nothingness; the particular qualities of the objects upon which he works might present new and unpredictable threats to his very life. The bondsman, in his encounter with the absolute Lord, thus finds himself in an aporetic position: he is simultaneously abandoned completely to the uncertainty and contingency of things, and he is also brought back to the potentiality of mastering or working on that particularity.

\(^{16}\) Ibid, s. 194, p. 117
And indeed, it is only by engaging closely with the particularity of the objects around him that the bondsman comes to actualize his freedom: “Work…is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off…The negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence.”17 Through this continued activity, the bondsman comes to understand his independence: “Without the formative activity, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become explicitly for itself.”18 For Hegel, the process of work eventually severs the chain that tethers the bondsman to the particularity and contingency of his existence. In the end, the fear of death has disclosed to him the possibility of mastery “over the universal power and the whole of objective being.”19 The bondsman thus ends where the lord started: on the path toward sovereign mastery over existence, a form of freedom that is only realized much later in the State.

We can read the lord/bondsman dialectic as a parable about the prerequisites for subjective freedom. It does not, to be sure, tell the tale of fully developed individual freedom. Rather, it relates the conditions under which the subject’s own particular freedom begins to emerge. Subjective freedom seems to be bounded by two types of particularity that would seem to constitute permanent barriers to stable reconciliation with the universal. The engagement with particular, material existents, and the understanding of oneself as a finite and contingent in the face of death, seem to be these boundary conditions. The lord is brought back to his dependence upon the particular objects that he consumes, and this realization undermines his independence. In a parallel fashion, the bondsman’s quest for self-certainty requires the realization of his finitude in

17 Ibid, s. 195, p. 118
18 Ibid, s. 196, p. 119
19 Ibid
the face of death, an encounter that, paradoxically, both reveals the falsehood of the
lord’s apparently sovereign freedom and provides a stepping stone toward becoming
master of “the whole of objective being.” On the one hand, the lord falls short of true
freedom precisely because he comes to recognize the precariousness of his own position,
the fact that he too is dependent upon particular, material existence. His attempt to
separate himself from this existence, to transform himself into pure subject bereft of
object, is doomed to failure. On the other hand, the bondsman only realizes his freedom
by acknowledging his connection with particular, material existence and engaging with it
directly. He does so in an antagonistic fashion, one that seeks complete mastery over his
object-world. Yet the absolute Lord, the specter of death that imbues him with an
awareness of his finitude, represents an insurmountable barrier to such mastery.

Such a description of subjective freedom, however, seems to undermine the
possibility that individual freedoms could be fully united in a horizon of mutual
recognition; this horizon, defined by the identity of the “I” and the “We,” would seem to
be necessarily marked by antagonism and contingency. The dialectic of lord and
bondsman gives us a tense, antagonistic relationship between the universal—the negative
consciousness of the bondsman—and the particular—materiality and death. It is not clear
how the negativity of this relationship could be surmounted without cleansing existence
of all traces of particularity and contingency. But it is not possible to supersede death in
such a fashion, and Hegel’s critique of the lord seems to point out the folly in trying to
separate oneself from the particularity of material existence. The lord/bondsman dialectic
thus suggests that the relation between universality and particularity can never be one of
smooth reconciliation or harmony. Instead, in the struggle for freedom, the two sides of
this dialectic must continue their combat. The understanding of freedom as an uncertain, continuous struggle between universality and particularity is, in my view, one side of Hegel’s idea of recognition. In order to flesh out the second—and, I think, opposed—side, I now turn to Hegel’s later descriptions of political community in both the *Phenomenology* and *The Philosophy of Right*.

**The Impotent Sovereign**

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel makes a promise concerning his dialectical method: that the earlier stages of the dialectic will be both negated and preserved in their later syntheses, a process designated by the famously untranslatable term *Aufhebung*.20 In Hegel’s later philosophy, however, it seems that the ambiguous figure of the “particularity of existence” that we have been discussing is not preserved, but is left suspended. The analysis of subjective freedom at the beginning of *The Philosophy of Right*, for instance, deals not with the concreteness of a struggle between two human beings but with the abstract concept of the will. In this analysis, fully realized subjective freedom is understood as the stage at which the will “has reference to nothing but itself, so that every relationship of dependence on something other than itself is thereby eliminated.”21 Such a will “is universal, because all limitation and particular individuality are superseded within it.”22 The dialectic of subjective freedom that Hegel articulates in *The Philosophy of Right* does not remain abstract—indeed, Hegel’s argument against Kantian morality has to do with its formalism, its lack of concreteness—but its entire

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20 Ibid, s. 29, p. 17
22 Ibid, s. 24, p. 54
development is marked by this choice of starting point. It is significant, for example, that in this work, Hegel begins the transition to concrete ethical life, where mutual recognition is embodied, with the idea of *morality* rather than the concrete struggle between master and slave. That is, he begins with the individual, formal consciousness that understands itself as ideally *autonomous*. In doing so, Hegel ensures that the ensuing description of realized freedom in the State is purified of all heteronomy. The Other is still required as a reference-point in mutual recognition, but he or she no longer appears as other or strange: the Other comes to be seen as identical to the Self against the background of *Geist*, of rational law.

This dialectical sleight of hand was, in a sense, already present in the dialectic of self-certainty. Even before entering into the lord/bondsman dialectic, self-consciousness mysteriously frees itself from physical Desire, allowing it to move toward recognition of the Other. One wonders, however, whether Desire is really about the individual simply asserting his or her self-certainty, and consequently whether this move is justified. Desire seems inextricably linked to material interest in the world, to physical needs that the recognition of another person as abstract, generic human subjectivity could hardly provide. As Marx pointed out, these material needs vanish in Hegel’s account of the struggle for independence. In the end, Hegel believes that the bondsman can overcome such needs through work, thereby establishing the independence of his self-consciousness from particular existence.

This abstracting procedure, by which consciousness and the will are emptied of particularity, is manifest most fully in Hegel’s description of the political community in the later sections of the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right*. In such a
community, the freedom of particular individuals must be brought into harmony with the
substance of the universal, and these individuals must be conscious of this unity. In a
political society characterized by mutual recognition, individuals recognize themselves as
particular instantiations of Geist, which “speaks its universal language in the customs
and laws of [the] nation.”\(^{23}\) Mutual recognition is therefore only complete when each
individual who recognizes and is recognized participates in the same universal medium,
the same shared horizon. This transition from particularity to universality, however, also
marks an important transition in the idea of recognition, one that will be ultimately
decisive in how mutual recognition is finally framed and understood. Recognition in the
political state is not the recognition of the particular Other, as it was in the
lord/bondsman dialectic. Indeed, recognition is not even recognition of another person as
such. Rather, for Hegel, recognition in its deepest sense is the recognition of Geist, of the
universal medium that flows through and supersedes each individual. In a theory that
bears the marks of the Platonic theory of Ideas and participation, only in recognizing
oneself and others as equal participants in Geist does each person finally achieve self-
certainty: “In the universal Spirit, therefore, each has only the certainty of himself, of
finding in the actual world nothing but himself; he is as certain of the others as he is of
himself.”\(^ {24}\)

If recognition consists in understanding one’s own and one’s fellow citizens’
places in Geist, is the antagonism of subjective freedom we saw in the lord/bondsman
dialectic similarly subordinated to the infinite repose of the universal? Hegel’s later
descriptions of subjective freedom and particularity in The Philosophy of Right are telling

\(^{23}\) Phenomenology, s. 351, p. 213
\(^{24}\) Ibid
in this respect. In his description of the concrete constitution of political society, or
Objective Spirit, the sovereign appears as the most complete expression of the dynamics
of self-certainty that Hegel articulates throughout his work: “But subjectivity attains its
truth only as a subject, and personality only as a person, and in a constitution which has
progressed to real rationality…[t]his absolutely decisive moment of the whole…is not
individuality in general, but one individual, the monarch.”  

This absolute form of subjective freedom, however, has some bizarre features. On
the one hand, the sovereign represents the final and incontrovertible decision for the
affairs of State: he holds the “ultimate and self-determining decision of the will” that is
determinative of the whole. Indeed, the moment in which the sovereign says “I will” is
representative of the will of Geist itself, freed from the constraint of particularity: “this
ultimate self-determination can fall within the sphere of human freedom only in so far as
it occupies this supreme position, isolated for itself and exalted above everything
particular and conditional”. On the other hand, the sovereign’s decision has no
substance whatsoever. In saying “I will,” the sovereign “often has nothing more to do
than to sign his name”; and again, “all that is required in a monarch is someone to say
‘yes’ and to dot the ‘I’”. The sovereign, in signing his name, does everything and
nothing: the stroke of his pen expresses both the tranquil majesty of the universal and the
utter emptiness of a mere signature. Subjective freedom, in its supreme form, bears no
trace of the bondsman’s tense and uncertain struggle with particularity. Evacuated of
content, subjective freedom simply signs its name at the bottom of a prewritten contract
dictated by the voice of Geist. Freedom bows to the necessity of the rational laws and

25 Philosophy of Right, s. 279, p. 317
26 Ibid, s. 279, p. 320
27 Ibid, p. 321; s. 280, p. 322
institutions of the nation that construct the policy which the sovereign must approve or repudiate.

The account of Hegelian freedom that I have just given is highly truncated. I have not been able to analyze large amounts of text describing the laborious transition from the lord/bondsman dialectic to the power of the sovereign. However, I would like to argue that the account I have given highlights two persistent features of the complex of freedom and recognition in Hegel’s thought. First, the object of recognition in this account is not another person as such, but the power of the universal that animates that particular person. Recognition thus situates specific individuals within a universal horizon and understands their particularity to be fully expressed only insofar as it participates in this horizon. The specific content of the recognized individual is thus subordinated to the universality of Geist, which is ontologically prior. Second, if subjective freedom is constituted through reciprocal recognition and expressed most fully in the sovereign, this freedom is nothing other than an acceptance—or recognition—of the universal medium within which it moves. Just as the sovereign most completely exercises his subjective freedom by signing his name and leaving existing political arrangements unchanged, the subjective freedom of the ordinary individual consists in recognizing and accepting oneself as a member of Geist. In both cases—self-recognition and recognition of the other—the final object of recognition is the universal, not the particular.

While for Hegel, these features of recognition represent Geist’s overcoming of the unstable nature of particularity that the lord/bondsman dialectic captures so well, the relation of the former to the latter seems more like one of disavowal. The presence of particularity that plays the central role in the struggle of the bondsman is not “overcome”
by the political state, but simply vanishes into its elaborate hierarchy. But the particular features of our object-world, and of another person, are ones that we continually struggle with and which reveal to us our own finitude. That is, the struggle for self-certainty in the face of our specific life situation does not sit comfortably within a universal medium but is inextricably tied to contingency of the particular. I would like to suggest that Hegel’s cure for what he seems to perceive as the infection of particularity is what Nietzsche might have called a “priestly cure” that is worse than the original illness. The essential point that emerges from foregoing analysis is that mutual recognition cannot, and should not, escape the instability that comes with particularity. On the contrary, the negative moment of freedom expressed in the lord/bondsman dialectic should be preserved. This would give us a picture of the struggle for recognition as always incomplete, always beginning anew, forced to address particular situations that continue to present themselves. I will articulate such a picture of recognition through a reading of the work of Theodor Adorno and his concept of “nonidentity.” Before doing so, however, I would like to examine a contemporary reworking of the ideal of mutual recognition. Since it is mostly contemporary versions of mutual recognition, rather than Hegel’s original version, that have currency in ongoing debates in political theory, it would be useful to see if the critique that has emerged here applies to these newer manifestations of recognition as well as Hegel’s. In “The Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor gives an account of the ideal of recognition as applied to problems of multiculturalism and group identity. Though he draws from Hegel, his version of recognition does not ostensibly rest upon similarly strong ontological claims about the preeminence of Geist. However, Taylor’s idea of recognition is inextricably tied to the second Hegel, the one who disavows
particularity and treats freedom as the acceptance of rational law; or so I will argue. It is to this account of recognition that I now turn.
The Call of Authenticity: Charles Taylor’s Concept of Cultural Recognition

Introduction: Hegel’s Shadow

Charles Taylor’s essay “The Politics of Recognition” is one of the best-known recent reformulations of the ideal of mutual recognition in political theory. Taylor’s particular brand of recognition seems well-suited to testing the validity of my characterization of theories of recognition as reducing particularity to universality, for two reasons. First, Taylor explicitly repudiates any notion of the cosmic meta-subject of Geist that progresses through history, which he sees as one of the less believable tenets of Hegel’s system. Second, the aim of his “Politics of Recognition” is to show the compatibility of a politics that emphasizes cultural difference with a politics that stresses the universality of certain liberal rights. That is, he wishes to show that strong universalist claims are compatible with fostering particular differences. Taylor’s work thus represents a serious challenge to “postmodern” objectors who accuse liberal universalism of necessarily marginalizing difference.

Despite these qualities, Taylor may seem to be a strange choice for discussion in this thesis, given that my intention is to deal with questions concerning political freedom and its relation to intersubjective recognition: Taylor’s essay seems to be concerned primarily with integrating different cultural goods into liberal political arrangements. Although this problem certainly intersects with questions surrounding liberal conceptions of freedom, Taylor’s essay deals more explicitly with questions of multicultural justice or group identity than questions of political freedom. Interestingly, the place in his work where Taylor does directly address the question of freedom is his work on Hegel. I would

like to argue that the central themes that Taylor draws from Hegel on freedom actually permeate his entire work, whether it be the discussion of moral identity in *Sources of the Self* or the attempt to work out a compromise between liberalism and the politics of difference in “The Politics of Recognition.” My contention is that Taylor’s understanding of recognition ultimately remains in Hegel’s shadow, and that this reliance on Hegelian themes causes him to misconstrue some of the dynamics of freedom and intersubjectivity in a similar fashion to the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right*. If this is the case, then Taylor should also be susceptible to arguments against the way that Hegel configures the relationship between particularity and universality. More specifically, I will argue that both Hegel and Taylor rely upon a similar version of the genus/species model in understanding particular difference. Such a model, as we have already seen in Hegel, treats particular differences as species of a broader genus, like *Geist*, which is seen as ontologically prior to those differences.

In order to demonstrate the above claim, however, it will first be necessary to connect Taylor’s concept of recognition to Hegel’s in two ways. First, I will try to show exactly what Taylor’s version of recognition retains from Hegel’s philosophy. Second, I believe that the objections that I will level against Taylor strengthen the critical significance of the various tensions I brought up in the previous chapter, and they should be read as extensions of those same concerns. This approach will force me to arrive at the problem of recognition in a circumlocutory fashion, first addressing what I take to be Taylor’s revisions of Hegelian categories: the idea of moral sources and the ideal of authenticity. I will argue that the use of these categories cause Taylor to construe freedom in a fashion similar to Hegel’s understanding of the sovereign: as the acceptance of a
preexisting moral law. I will conclude the chapter with an analysis of Taylor’s essay on recognition, an analysis that will end with my suggesting a different model of recognition from Hegel or Taylor’s, one derived from the work of Theodor Adorno.

**Freedom and Differentiation: Taylor on Hegel**

Perhaps the central, animating theme of Taylor’s work is the inadequacy of an atomistic picture of human society, an analytic whose origins he locates in the Enlightenment praise of disembodied, rational subjectivity. This is a concern he shares with Hegel, and it is one of the first problems that he calls attention to in *Hegel and Modern Society*:

> The focus of [Hegel’s] objection was against a view of man as the subject of egoistic desires, for which nature and society provided merely the means to fulfillment. It was a philosophy which was utilitarian in its ethical outlook, atomistic in its social philosophy, analytic in its science of man, and which looked to a scientific social engineering to reorganize man and society and bring men happiness through perfect mutual adjustment.\(^{29}\)

Indeed, Taylor begins the collection of essays entitled *Human Agency and Language* by asserting that a contestation of this “atomistic” vision of human life is central to his account of agency.\(^{30}\)

For Taylor, Hegel’s notion of subjectivity, which he construes as “an attempt to realize the synthesis between rational autonomy and expressive unity,” has at least two key features that distinguish it from the Enlightenment model of the disengaged, rational subject.\(^{31}\) First, Hegel’s subject is “inescapably embodied.” Whereas Enlightenment rationalists such as Kant often depict the subject as the bearer of an abstract, ideal rationality, disconnected from the material world, Hegel instead suggests that the rational

\(^{29}\) Ibid, 1


\(^{31}\) Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 14
aspect of human existence comes with a necessary supplement. The subject is embodied “in two related dimensions: as a ‘rational animal’, that is, a living being who thinks; and as an expressive being, that is, a being whose thinking always and necessarily expresses itself in a medium.”32 This is the “principle of necessary embodiment.” Second, the subject exists not only within an embodied medium, but also against what might called be a spiritually significant background, that of Geist. The subject can only realize its self-expression and freedom against the background of a cosmic world-spirit that pre-exists and in some sense determines the subject’s form of self-realization. Since I discussed Hegel’s notion of Geist in the previous chapter, I will not explain it further here, especially since Taylor ostensibly wishes to dispense with this ontology. Nonetheless, his description of Hegelian self-realization within Geist will have significant implications for my argument later on, so I will quote Taylor at length on this point:

But the self-expression and self-awareness of Geist is something infinitely higher than our own. When man comes to full awareness of his perfect self-expression, he recognizes in this something which is ultimately given. Human nature, what is common to all men, is there as a basis or determinable which circumscribes the field for every man’s original creation. And even my original creation, the things in my life that seem to express me as against man in general, even these seem to come to me as inspiration which I cannot fully fathom, much less control. That is why…not all of human life can be seen as expression; but much of what we do and what goes on in us must be understood purely in terms of our life form, just as we do with animals with no power of expression. And even our expressive activity is conditioned by this life form.

With Geist it is meant to be different. Its whole embodiment is supposed to be an expression of it as well. The universe, as this embodiment, is thought to be posited by Geist. Geist posits its own embodiment. Hence there can be nothing merely given. I as a human being have the vocation of realizing a nature which is given: and even if I am called on to be original, to realize myself in the way uniquely suited to myself, nevertheless this scope for originality is itself given as an integral part of human nature, as are those unique features of me on which my originality builds. Freedom for man thus means the free realization of a vocation which is largely given. But Geist should be free in a radical sense. What it realizes and recognizes as having been realized is not given, but determined by itself.33

32 Ibid, 18
33 Ibid, 28-29
Taylor here gives an account of Hegel’s famous identification of freedom and necessity. Taylor’s take on it, however, has a particular spin. He emphasizes how self-expression connects with the notion of vocation, that is, the need for each individual to realize an identity that is original, uniquely his or her own. This calling is not free-floating and arbitrary, but plays out against the background of Geist, which makes such a vocation possible but also partially circumscribes it. As Taylor reads him, Hegel understand each individual’s particular vocation as entailing an eventual reconciliation with the universal, an acceptance of the way that Spirit ultimately determines the grounds on which we pursue our own unique ends. “I…have the vocation of realizing a nature which is given,” which means that the individual, in fulfilling his or her particular difference or vocation, must accede to the original aim which Geist has given him or her.

A major political problem that this conception raises is how to reconcile each individual’s particular vocation within a single society. For Hegel, preserving many of the elements of Kant’s doctrine of freedom, the individual pursues his original vocation in accord with the demands of reason: “[S]ince this is an order deployed by an unconditional rational necessity, it is at no point foreign to ourselves as rational subjects.”34 Acceding to rational law is thus, in a sense, simply acceding to the law that comes from ourselves, that makes us autonomous. As with Kant, freedom can admit nothing heteronomous, nothing radically Other to the self. Unlike Kant, however, for Hegel the entire society, as the embodiment of human freedom, must be autonomous. The hostility to heteronomy is thus extended to the field of relations with others in a community: “Freedom is only real (wirklich) when expressed in a form of life; and since man cannot live on his own, this must be a collective form of life…freedom must be

34 Ibid, 48
embodied in the state.”\textsuperscript{35} It follows that, in pursuing a vocation, each individual must recognize the all-encompassing voice of \textit{Geist}, the unifying framework within which these callings find their intelligibility and basic similarity.

Individual freedom is the autonomous pursuit of a particular vocation organized in the universal form of the political state; a free society, correlatively, is one that has organized each of these vocations into a differentiated but unified whole. Since the unification of the particular and the universal is here of the utmost importance, Taylor emphasizes the role of specialization in Hegel’s system: “To be mingled in undifferentiated form is a more primitive stage. Thus the fully developed state is one in which the different moments of the Concept…are realized in separate groups, each with the appropriate mode of life.”\textsuperscript{36} Polemicizing against the struggle for “absolute freedom” represented by the French Revolution and Rousseauism—that is, the ideal of total and universal participation in political society that emphasizes the homogeneity of the citizenry—Taylor points to the importance for Hegel of decentralization and differentiation: “[Hegel] saw the immense importance to a democratic polity of vigorous constituent communities in a decentralized structure of power”.\textsuperscript{37} For Hegel, it is \textit{Geist}, the Idea, that articulates itself in various different ways to create this form of decentralization. For Taylor, however, this ontology is no longer acceptable; but the dilemma of differentiation and freedom remains.

There are thus at least two elements of Hegel’s system that Taylor views as important to questions in contemporary political theory, elements which, as I will later argue, he incorporates into his own theory: 1) the idea of an original vocation in which

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 51
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 110
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 118
each individual can realize his or her rational freedom and 2) the idea of a differentiated political community that accommodates these distinct vocations in a harmonious fashion. It is worth wondering, however, before proceeding, whether Taylor’s reading of Hegel presents us with a false dilemma. Throughout Taylor’s account of Hegel’s work, we seem to be given stark alternatives: either the disconnected atomism of Enlightenment liberalism, or the harmonious, differentiated community that gives political substance to human intersubjectivity. Despite his protests against Hegelian ontology, Taylor seems to preserve its emphasis on the harmonious unification of differences within a totality: “one of the great needs of a modern democratic polity is to recover a sense of significant differentiation, so that its partial communities…can again become important centers of concern and activity for their members in a way that connects them to the whole.”

A relatively uncontroversial assertion, on the face of it. But without Geist, how are we guaranteed that the telos of human intersubjectivity is toward unity and harmony? Is it not at least conceivable that intersubjectivity should entail, in addition to impulses toward harmony, elements of contestation, critique, and distance? If this is so, why ontologically prioritize the former impulses over the latter? Taylor himself shows that finite subjects undergo opposition not only within themselves but also from the external world within which their free projects must unfold. Might not conflict and distance be permanent elements of relations with others and with the material world, as my reading of Hegel’s lord/bondsman dialectic suggested? Before offering an affirmative answer to this question, I would like to turn to the ways in which Taylor reformulates these two

\[38\] Ibid, 118
\[39\] Ibid, 41
important elements of Hegel’s system: the concept of moral sources and the ideal of authenticity.

**The “Inescapable Frameworks” of Moral Goods**

A major part of Taylor’s challenge to Enlightenment atomism is his critique of ethical theories that can generally be referred to as “projectivist” or “naturalist.” These ethical theories, of which J.L. Mackie’s “error theory” and R.M. Hare’s “prescriptivism” can serve as examples, treat values as non-real constructs that humans “project” onto an essentially valueless world. In this picture, moral values are nothing more than subjective preferences that humans affirm in a particularly fervent manner. In opposition to this view, Taylor asserts the inescapability of certain strong moral claims to human life. This inescapability is grounded in a phenomenological description of how individuals articulate both their everyday desires and morally significant projects. Integral to this account is the notion that moral goods are qualitatively distinct from the (allegedly) arbitrary desires that we project onto the world. These goods are, in Taylor’s view, inextricable from our best account of our moral ontology: we would not be able accurately to describe how humans engage with their world on an ethical level without appealing to certain moral goods that are distinct from arbitrary preferences.

Closely analyzing Taylor’s concept of moral goods is important to my argument because it is with reference to these goods that the problem of recognition first arises in Taylor’s work. Here, recognition has the primary sense of acknowledging the centrality of certain moral goods to a meaningful human life. The moral goods that I “recognize,” in this instance, will be those that imbue my life and my actions with significance, at least
(though, in Taylor’s view, not only) in my own eyes. Because there is a diversity of such goods, however, this question of recognition necessarily spills over onto a question of whether or not, and how, we recognize the moral goods that other people affirm as significant. As such, recognition of moral goods is not the only concept of recognition in Taylor’s writing; when we grapple with how to recognize moral goods that are not our own, we also grapple with the question of how we recognize cultural identity. This is the question that Taylor takes up in “The Politics of Recognition,” and I will wait to discuss this tricky issue until I examine that essay. For now, I will discuss what the first form of recognition means, in Taylor’s analysis, as well as what he takes to be the nature of the moral goods that are the objects of such recognition. This discussion will draw primarily from Taylor’s earlier work, *Sources of the Self*, which precedes his work on authenticity and on the politics of recognition. My intention is to show that Taylor’s concept of moral goods retains some of the important characteristics of Hegel’s *Geist*, which, as we have seen, acts as an ontological horizon in which particular vocations are realized.

Taylor’s argument about moral goods follows from his assertion that the various strands of naturalist ethics make the same mistake: they conflate what could be called instinctual preferences with moral evaluations. An instinctual preference is something of a gut feeling provoked by a certain object, such as “our aversion to nauseous substances, or our fear of falling.”\(^40\) While these reactions may be important in dealing with the world on an everyday basis, for Taylor, they are strictly subjective and do not make a further claim on the ontological status of the object in question. When we make a moral judgment, however, we understand the object in question to *merit* a certain kind of

reaction: “[I]n one case the property marks the object as one *meriting* this reaction; in the other the connection between the two is just a brute fact.”\(^{41}\) For Taylor, we cannot make sense of this latter type of judgment by conflating it with subjective preference. Rather, such claims are seen as independent of our particular desires: “a moral reaction is an assent to, an affirmation of, a given ontology of the human.”\(^{42}\)

This “assent to…a given ontology of the human” is what Taylor will call a “strong evaluation.” Like “hinge propositions” in Wittgenstein, strong evaluations are distinguishable from everyday desires and inclinations in that they provide the background against which these choices are made and judged. These types of evaluations are unavoidable for Taylor in that they necessarily shape the way we live our everyday lives; we wouldn’t be able to “get along” without them. One of the most important of these strong evaluations—for Taylor, “[p]erhaps the most urgent”—is that “cluster of demands that…concern the respect for the life, integrity, and well-being, even flourishing, of others.”\(^{43}\) The type of goods that we generally associate with questions of the dignity of persons are, in Taylor’s estimation, perhaps even more important than other sorts of strong evaluation: “[O]ur dignity is so much interwoven into our very comportment. The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space”\(^{44}\). In other words, we would not be able to make sense of how we navigate social space without granting the notion of dignity the status of a strong evaluation, a quality woven into the ontological fabric of the human being.

\(^{41}\) Ibid, 6
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 5
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 4
\(^{44}\) Ibid, 15
There is thus a certain hierarchy within strong evaluations, in which “we acknowledge second-order qualitative distinctions which define higher goods, on the basis of which we discriminate among other goods”\textsuperscript{45}. These second-order strong evaluations, of which Taylor takes universal benevolence or universal justice as examples, are what he calls “hypergoods.” We might schematize the hierarchy of Taylor’s moral ontology in the following way: at the bottom, we have instinctive preferences that are subjective evaluations of certain objects. Next, we have strong evaluations, which judge objects, and more importantly persons, as meriting certain behavior, especially respect. Finally, we have hypergoods, which draw together strong evaluations under the aegis of the highest virtues, such as benevolence and justice.

For Taylor, these subtle discriminations among types of judgment are crucial for any phenomenology of moral life that fits the “BA principle,” or “best account principle.” The BA principle is Taylor’s basic standard for evaluating the validity of metaethical theories—it is this standard that, in his view, naturalist ethics fails to meet. “My point is that this kind of indispensability of a term in a non-explanatory context of life can’t just be declared irrelevant to the project to do without that term in an explanatory reduction.”\textsuperscript{46} To translate this technical account into more intuitive language, Taylor’s BA principle states that naturalistic theories cannot simply do away with such distinctions in moral judgment if it can be shown that these concepts are indispensable for making sense of moral experience. Taylor could thus theoretically concede that naturalist theories are correct on some deep level, but still maintain that this is largely irrelevant to our

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 63
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 57
experience of moral life. In Taylor’s picture, strong evaluations are an inescapable fixture of moral experience, closely akin to transcendental structures of experience in Kant.

Consequently, the process of recognizing moral goods involves acknowledging those strong evaluations that we cannot but use in making sense of our life, as well as the hypergoods that draw these evaluations together in a unified picture. We must recognize such goods not only as theorists of morality, but also in our everyday life; otherwise, for Taylor, our actions would lack meaning and significance. However, this recognition cannot just consist of recognizing moral goods. This is because the need for strong evaluation spills over into the question of individual identity-formation, as well as the question of human agency⁴⁷: “[T]he claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.”⁴⁸ For Taylor, we “make sense” of our own identities against a background of strong moral evaluations; further, this background is necessary for agency, since our very actions would not make sense outside of it. Of course, we could certainly point to many actions that we undertake on an everyday basis that do not require the support of moral backgrounds. Most of our daily habits—our morning routines, leisure activities, various types of unskilled labor—do not necessarily require any reflection on how they are contextualized against strong evaluations. What Taylor seems to be referring to here is what could be called morally significant action. It is action that we

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⁴⁷ While it may usually be helpful to distinguish between the terms “freedom” and “agency,” it seems to me that Taylor understands them in essentially the same way, though he generally prefers “agency.” For Taylor, agency refers to both the freedom to undertake meaningful actions and also the moral self-understanding necessary to give those actions significance. His understanding of agency thus reflects the Hegelian idea that our actions must take place within a horizon of mutual recognition in order to be considered “free.” Consequently, for the purposes of the thesis, I will treat “agency” and “freedom” as essentially exchangeable terms.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 27
understand to be integral to our definition of who we are, action that, perhaps, we see as uniquely our own. It is this type of actions that, in Taylor’s view, is always carried out against a background of significant moral evaluations.

Another important way that Taylor describes this moral embeddedness is through his concept of dialogue:

The self is partly constituted by its self-interpretations…But the self’s interpretations can never be fully explicit. Full articulacy is an impossibility. The language we have come to accept articulates the issues of the good for us…A language only exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of the self. One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it.\(^49\)

We come to articulate ourselves in relation to moral goods only through “webs of interlocution.” Certainly, for Taylor, one can take a “heroic stance” and try to leap outside of the linguistic or cultural community that one finds oneself within. Even this form of heroism, however, is only possible “through some kind of interchange with others with whom one has some common understanding about what is at stake in the enterprise.”\(^50\) Taylor identifies this as a “transcendental” condition of having an articulable and recognizable self. To borrow Heidegger’s formulation, language is indeed the “house of Being” for Taylor insofar as the community within which we articulate ourselves is “ontogenetically prior” and inescapable:

The point is to insist on what I might call this ‘transcendental’ condition of our having a grasp on our own language, that we in some fashion confront it or relate it to the language of others…In speaking of a ‘transcendental’ condition here, I am pointing to the way in which the very confidence that we know what we mean, and hence our having our own original language, depends on this relating. The original and (ontogenetically) inescapable context of such relating is the face-to-face one in which we actually agree.\(^51\)

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\(^{49}\) Ibid, 35  
\(^{50}\) Ibid, 37  
\(^{51}\) Ibid, 38
With this description, Taylor evokes the important notion with respect to language communities that is equally applicable to his idea of moral sources: that the significant backgrounds that are constitutive of human selfhood and agency are essentially *shared*. They are horizons that we hold in common, that we agree upon, and which are integral to the language of a certain community. Indeed, there are even certain hypergoods that Taylor finds to be more universal and agreed upon than others, that seem to cut across multiple communities, especially claims about the importance of human dignity and the respect it demands. One consequence of this description of moral goods is that the language that Taylor uses to describe human agency increasingly becomes the language of *accepting* or *acceding* to shared backgrounds. In order to achieve agency, we must come to terms not only with our situatedness in a moral framework, but the “transcendental” moral frameworks that we necessarily have in common with others in our religious, ethnic, national, etc. communities, as well as the even broader moral frameworks of universal justice or benevolence that seem to Taylor to be typical of nearly all human communities. We must accede to or discover ourselves within the frameworks that we have been given, since they are ontogenetically prior:

> [W]e can also explore a way of seeing our normal fulfillments as significant even in a non-providential world. The significance would lie simply in the fact that they are ours; that human beings cannot help, by their very make-up, according significance to them; and that the path of wisdom involves coming to terms with, and accepting, our normal make-up.\(^\text{52}\)

In light of this, we can attempt a preliminary interpretation of what recognition means for Taylor. If, as we saw, recognition is 1) the necessary recognition of certain hypergoods and 2) the recognition of the identities that we and others articulate within the contexts set down by hypergoods, then recognition seems to have two crucial qualities on

\(^{52}\) Ibid, 334
top of these aspects. First, that which is recognized would be that which is held in common, a background, such as a strong evaluation or a higher hypergood, that is shared. Second, the most important form of agency that is connected with this recognition would be one of the discovery and acceptance of one’s “normal make-up” within these shared frameworks. There is consequently a crucial sense in which Taylor repeats the logic of Hegelian Geist. Moral frameworks are shared, “transcendental” backgrounds that we must accept in order to have meaningful agency, just as, in Hegel, subjective freedom must eventually accede to the rational freedom of Geist. Further, like Geist, moral frameworks are essentially spaces of agreement in which different identities subsist in harmony, like the species within a genus:

We agree surprisingly well, across great differences of theological and metaphysical belief, about the demands of justice and benevolence, and about their importance. There are differences, including the stridently debated one about abortion. But the very rarity of these cases, which contributes to their saliency, is eloquent testimony to the general agreement.53

But, I want to ask, how rare are these conflicts, in fact? Even if this “general agreement” does actually exist, the moral goods that Taylor delineates and the demands that they place on our lives are highly abstract: many individuals and cultures certainly share a commitment to justice, but there are also many interpretations of precisely what this commitment means. Certainly Taylor acknowledges the reality of some of these conflicts—he points to the example of abortion—but he seems to underestimate their frequency. An atheistic socialist and an American evangelical Protestant, for example, will both adhere strongly to visions of universal justice and benevolence, but they will advance radically different ideas concerning what these moral goods mean and how they are to be embodied in political society.

53 Ibid, 515
My claim is not simply that Taylor seems to gloss over some of the conflicts that arise around moral goods, however. Rather, my central claim is that the way that Taylor has framed recognition seems to ensure that his theory will emphasize—indeed, overemphasize—that which is shared in moral frameworks over the divergent ways of interpreting moral goods. Recognition is only possible for Taylor on the basis of a common background; and this indeed seems to be the case: how could we “recognize” something if we could not relate it to the familiar frameworks within which we live and act? But the fact that the shared horizons that Taylor distinguishes seem to be abstract and generic suggests that his version of recognition is often too blunt an instrument: it is ill-equipped to deal with the ways that individuals and groups may actively differentiate themselves, in their morally significant action, from the shared backgrounds that they have previously taken for granted. In this sense, Taylor seems to run up against the same problem that we saw in Hegel: recognition often glosses over the persistence of antagonisms in particular struggles for recognition, or the fact that morally significant action can and does continue to resist categorization under abstract norms.

This is especially the case in Taylor’s account, as we shall see, when he begins to apply this concept of recognition to individual identities within these broad frameworks. In fact, recognition of moral backgrounds is only the first sense in which Taylor employs the concept of recognition. To understand the second sense, we must turn to his account of authenticity.
The Ideal of Authenticity

The questions that I have just raised concern the usefulness of Taylor’s concept of moral backgrounds for describing the varied attitudes that individuals or groups can take toward different moral goods. Taylor seems to overestimate the extent to which moral horizons are shared, moving too quickly from the idea that we share certain basic hypergoods to the assertion of substantive agreement on what those goods mean. A major part of the problem here seems to be the language that Taylor uses to describe how the self is situated in relation to these goods. The self must “discover” itself within certain moral frameworks; it must come to “accept” its “normal make-up”: this is the first sense of recognition in his work. In short, Taylor appears to treat the moral frameworks as transcendental backgrounds that individuals must simply accede to in order to have meaningful agency.

My objections thus far, however, are based on some limited comments that Taylor makes in Sources of the Self. In order to understand adequately how Taylor conceives of individual agency with respect to moral goods, we must turn to his account of the ideal of authenticity, an account that Taylor gives three years after Sources in The Ethics of Authenticity. If moral goods appear to stand in for Geist in Taylor’s thought, authenticity stands in for the “original vocation,” or the particularity of an individual person, that must be reconciled with Geist. However, it would be fair to say that Taylor derives the ideal of authenticity as much or more from J.G. Herder as from Hegel. With Herder, “we have the notion that the good life for you is not the same as the good life for me; each of us has our own calling, and we shouldn’t exchange them…What the late eighteenth century
adds is the notion of originality.” Taylor distinguishes between two interpretations of this ideal, which he will call the ideal of “authenticity” or “originality.” One interpretation, the “subjectivist” interpretation, asserts that one’s authentic identity is straightforwardly the identity that grows up around one’s various desires, and rests upon one’s individual preferences. It is this version of authenticity that has endured assault from cultural critics such as Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch, and Taylor acknowledges the validity of these criticisms when applied to the subjectivist interpretation of authenticity.

But Taylor also sees another possible interpretation of the ideal of authenticity, one that remains more faithful to its roots in Hegel, Herder, and expressivism: “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something I can articulate and discover…I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own.”

Authenticity is what Taylor calls “inwardly generated identity”: it is my own specific way of living in a moral, fulfilled manner. Taylor, however, wishes to contest the subjectivist interpretation of this ideal that links authenticity to arbitrary preferences. Rather, Taylor argues that the pursuit of one’s authentic way of being only takes place against a background of moral significance, and in this sense the argument for authenticity follows directly from Taylor’s arguments for strong evaluations. One only realizes one’s authentic potentiality in certain significant areas: “Your feeling a certain way can never be sufficient grounds for respecting your position, because your feeling can’t determine what is significant. Soft relativism self-destructs.”

To rephrase this using the language from the previous section, authenticity is my own particular way of

54 Ibid, 375-6
56 Ibid, 37
undertaking *morally significant action*, and such action, in Taylor’s view, can only take place against certain significant moral backgrounds, or strong evaluations.

Taylor also calls attention to a second feature of authenticity that distinguishes it from subjectivist relativism, and again this feature follows directly from his previous discussions of moral goods. This feature is the central place of dialogic relations with others in realizing one’s authentic potentiality: “The general feature of human life that I want to evoke is its fundamentally *dialogical* character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression.”

It is with respect to the dialogic character of authenticity that the second sense of recognition arises in Taylor’s work: “[T]he development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition.” Whereas in the discussion of moral goods recognition meant acknowledgment of shared horizons, in the discussion of authenticity, recognition takes on the crucial sense of *understanding of inwardly-generated identity*. It is no longer simply respect for a moral horizon, but the act of comprehending and respecting of another person’s unique self. My agency depends upon whether or not certain “significant others” in my life recognize my original, authentic identity.

Attached to this is a *third* sense of recognition that runs between the first two: recognition of the way that the morally significant action of ourselves and others contributes to the creation of a unique identity. For Taylor, recognition is also an active process of dialogic engagement that ties together my authentic identity and the intersubjective moral horizons within which I am situated. As we will see later on, this last sense of

57 Ibid, 33
58 Ibid, 47-8
recognition, which tries to bridge the universal and the particular, causes Taylor some serious difficulties.

Of what does the recognition of a particular identity consist? It is here that we run up against some of the most interesting problems in Taylor’s account. There is a certain tension in Taylor’s use of the term “original” to describe inwardly-generated identity that often goes unacknowledged in his accounts of authenticity. On the one hand, original seems to mean something pre-existent, an identity that I discover for myself rather than one that I create. This hearkens back to the ideas, expressed in the previous section, that shared horizons are “ontogenetically prior” to individual ways of articulating moral goods. Taylor expresses the same sentiment with respect to recognizing difference:

If men and women are equal, it is not because they are different, but because overriding the difference are some properties, common or complementary, which are of value…To come together on a mutual recognition of difference—that is, of the equal value of different identities—requires that we share more than a belief in this principle; we have to share also some standards of value on which the identities concerned check out as equal. There must be some substantive agreement on value, or else the formal principle of equality will be empty and a sham (italics added).

We will see in the next section how Taylor’s distinction between substantive and procedural recognition of difference shapes his account of liberal politics. For authenticity, this idea of substantive agreement indicates that, for Taylor, the shared backgrounds within which we articulate our identities in some sense trump the particular differences that we carve out within them. They “override” the differences of particular identity and provide common standards of comparison. In this way, the first two senses of recognition that I have demarcated, recognition of moral backgrounds and recognition of individual identity, blur together: the important aspect in recognizing another individual’s

59 Ibid, 51-2
authentic identity is recognizing the moral good that he or she views as significant; this shared good is both more significant than and ontologically prior to the particularity of his or her authentic identity. Recognition would then be situating another within the transcendental horizons discussed in the previous section. This blurring is buttressed by the third sense of recognition, or the shaping of the self through dialogue, as that which mediates between the universal and the particular.

On the other hand, “original” also seems to have a different sense, one that Taylor openly acknowledges. Original means not only “pre-existent,” as in the distinction between original and derived, but also serves to designate something new, an original creation: “My self-discovery passes through a creation, the making of something original and new.” For Taylor, we must accept both senses of “original” if we are to understand the nature of authenticity. Authenticity involves “creation and construction as well as discovery,” and “[t]hat these demands may be in tension has to be allowed.” Certain “neo-Nietzschean” variants of this ideal, whose proponents Taylor happily identifies as “apostles of evil,” want to privilege the sense of original as creation over the sense of discovery; but for Taylor this misses an important dimension of authenticity.

But Taylor does not explore this interesting tension. Indeed, his account tends perpetually to disavow that it exists, despite his brief attempts to acknowledge it. Perhaps authentic individual identities require some form of creativity and newness, but the shared horizons in which this occurs “override” this type of originality. While we may fashion our identities in novel ways, we must still rely on certain significant moral goods as “ontogenetically prior” in order to make sense of these identities. Further, the

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60 Ibid, 62
61 Ibid, 66
recognition that these identities require in order to flourish seems to be precisely the recognition of the “substantive agreement” that undergirds authenticity more than the novelty that these identities may introduce. In each of his varied descriptions of recognition, Taylor tends toward a communitarian ethic underlying authenticity.

In a certain way, this tendency makes sense. Recognition, after all, seems to presuppose recognizability, or a shared horizon that makes particular identity intelligible or, in Taylor’s terminology, “articulable.” However, I would like to suggest that, just as Taylor overestimates the shared quality of moral goods, he strongly underestimates the tension between particular identity and shared moral backgrounds. In an account that he repeats almost verbatim in “The Politics of Recognition,” Taylor argues that recognition has always been an essential human need, but that the conditions in which recognition can fail only arise after the collapse of social hierarchies typical of Western modernity.62 However, if recognition can fail, this implies also that an original identity—in the first sense of “preexistent”—can be damaged through withheld recognition: “On the intimate level, we can see how much an original identity needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others.”63 And again, later, when describing “moral conflicts”: “Indeed, in certain contexts, when one is struggling to define a fragile and conflicted identity, forgetting the constraints [of external moral demands] can seem the only path to survival (italics added).”64

How is it possible that an original, authentic individual identity can be vulnerable? It is only because one’s authentic identity is produced through the supplement of intersubjective recognition that one’s quest to realize this identity can fail.

62 Ibid, 48
63 Ibid, 49
64 Ibid, 57
In exposing ourselves to communication with others, our identity becomes fragile, conflicted, and ultimately vulnerable to damage and change. But, following this line of reasoning further, if our authentic identities are vulnerable to change in relations with others, is it still possible to consider them somehow “authentic”? If our identities are truly stable bases for recognition by others that are uniquely our own, then it is hard to see why they should need the supplement of significant others to bring them out. If, however, they indeed require such a supplement, it is hard to see how they could any longer be “authentic” and serve as a stable basis for recognition. If identity is fragile and vulnerable in relations with others, then it is open to the perpetual possibility of transformation and, presumably, the possibility that individuals could come to find different things significant. Authenticity requires the supplement of inauthenticity—one’s “original” identity, in the first sense of original, is always already abandoned in favor of one derived from social recognition.

This tension appears to be integral to the way that Taylor describes recognition. In understanding recognition as both the acceptance of certain preexistent moral goods and the understanding of the authentic identities of ourselves and others, Taylor elides two very different processes. On the one hand, if recognition is respect for something transcendental or preexistent, then the process of recognition does nothing to shape or contest the moral good recognized; it simply accepts, discovers, accedes to something already there. On the other hand, if recognition actively shapes authentic identities as they struggle to respect these moral goods through morally significant action, then authentic identity is always in the process of becoming inauthentic, derived, creating variations on the themes of recognized moral goods. The third sense of recognition, as the
active shaping of identity through dialogue, thus cannot do the mediating work that Taylor wants it to do. On the contrary, the third, active sense of recognition seems to provide more avenues for particular identities to distance themselves from their generic, moral backgrounds through contestation, vulnerability, or even abandonment.

This situation puts us squarely back in the problem posed by Hegel’s lord/bondsman dialectic. In that dialectic, the apparently free subjectivity of the lord was seen to ignore the persistence of the material existents on which subjectivity must work, at least until he finally recognizes his dependence upon them. Yet despite the way that the struggle for subjective freedom in the lord/bondsman dialectic was fraught with uncertainty and difficulty, these tensions vanished in Hegel’s later descriptions of political community. We can see the same tension in Taylor’s account. In order for Taylor’s first two senses of recognition to correlate properly, the constitutive feature of authentic identity must be the process of acceding to given moral backgrounds. Yet conceiving of authentic identity in this way undermines some of Taylor’s best insights about the third sense of recognition, or how the process of recognition actively shapes the identities of those who engage in it. This restlessness of particular identity within shared backgrounds indicates some deep incoherencies in Taylor’s account. It seems to me that this incoherencies result from his overemphasis on the “ontogenetic” role of shared moral backgrounds. Before fully explicating this objection, however, I would like to turn to Taylor’s account of cultural politics in “The Politics of Recognition” in order to show how his concepts of moral goods and authenticity fit into his version of liberal democracy.


**Recognition and the Politics of Difference**

When Taylor begins to articulate the politics behind the demand for recognition, it becomes clear that recognition serves a specific end: to alleviate unjust and even violent forms of non or misrecognition: “Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.” We are now in a position to see why nonrecognition or misrecognition would inflict harm in Taylor’s view. If I fail to recognize another on his or her own terms, I prevent that individual from actualizing his or her authentic identity. Deprived of the recognition of significant others, that individual is also deprived of access to the hypergood that gives his or her life meaning and which allows this individual to engage in morally significant action. As with Hegel, the question of recognition becomes a question of freedom: nonrecognition unjustly limits the agency of another person. Since much of the discussion of authenticity that begins Taylor’s essay is taken directly from his other works, which I’ve already discussed, I will move forward to Taylor’s account of how recognition figures into liberal politics.

Taylor distinguishes between two approaches to recognition in contemporary theories of liberalism: the politics of universal dignity and the politics of difference. The former would be aligned with more mainstream versions of liberalism which stress neutrality and universal rights: “[W]hat is picked out as of worth here is a universal human potential, a capacity that all humans share. This potential, rather than anything a person may have made of it, is what ensures that each person deserves respect.” This is one facet of the ideal of authenticity: recognition of each person’s inner potential to

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66 Ibid, 41
develop his or her original identity. On the other hand, the politics of difference emphasizes the latter part of this potentiality, or the particular identity that each person has made out of his or her human potential. For Taylor, these two politics are closely interlinked insofar as the latter grows out of the former: “In the case of the politics of difference, we might also say that a universal potential is at its basis, namely, the potential for forming and defining one’s own identity, as an individual, and also as a culture.”\(^{67}\) The politics of difference simply takes this demand one step further, arguing that we must respect not only the potential, but also “what [each person] has made of this potential in fact.”

However, it already seems that Taylor has fallen into a sort of confusion in formulating this distinction. The politics of difference demands respect for the potential for inwardly generated identity “as an individual, and also as a culture.” Taylor does not seem to distinguish between these two levels. This may be in part because one of his major sources for the ideal of authenticity, Herder, also argues that both individuals and cultures have authentic identities. Yet surely the processes by which a particular individual forms his or her identity are distinct from the processes by which a culture in general generates a life good that its members tend to recognize. In formulating the distinction between politics of universal dignity and politics of difference, Taylor thus seems to repeat the elision between the first two senses of recognition discussed in the previous section: recognition of life goods (cultures, and especially their moral goods) and recognition of particular, authentic identities (individuals).

While this problem will become important later, I will set it aside for now. Suffice it to say, Taylor contends that in certain models of liberal politics, the margin to

\(^{67}\) Ibid, 42
recognize either of these kinds of difference is small.\textsuperscript{68} These models would include, in Taylor’s estimation, Rousseauean versions of the politics of equal dignity, which stress equal freedom and lack of differentiation, arguing for a tight common purpose in a polity. But it also includes versions of liberalism that do not include any strong notion of the good life at the center of political life. In this form of liberalism, equality must be strictly enforced, which means that the political apparatus must be neutral toward different visions of the good life; acting otherwise would be seen as discriminatory.\textsuperscript{69} An example of such a stance is Ronald Dworkin’s distinction between “procedural” and “substantive” goods in a liberal society. For Dworkin, at least as Taylor glosses him, a liberal polity cannot adopt a \textit{substantive} view of the good life. Rather, that society remains strongly committed to a “procedural norm” that is neutral toward difference in principle, but which ideally accommodates various different visions of the good life.

For Taylor, this proceduralist concept of liberalism is “guilty as charged by the proponents of a politics of difference.”\textsuperscript{70} Such a polity, by the very fact that it preserves value-neutrality, necessarily marginalizes certain cultural goods that do not fit into this neutralist vision; or so the proponents of the politics of difference would like to claim. For Taylor, however, it is possible to reconcile the politics of universal dignity with the politics of difference in another model of liberal politics. Such a model “[does] call for the invariant defense of \textit{certain} rights, of course…But [it distinguishes] these fundamental rights from the broad range of immunities and presumptions of uniform treatment that have sprung up in modern cultures of judicial review.” The politics of recognition is central to this possibility. Taylor argues that we must act on a presumption

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\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 51
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, 52
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 61
that each culture has some valuable good to contribute to a liberal polity: “As a presumption, the claim is that all human cultures that have animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something important to say to all human beings.”\textsuperscript{71} This notion seems to be grounded by an empirical observation that “cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings…are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect.”\textsuperscript{72} Only by affording these cultures proper recognition do we overcome the homogenization typical of a traditional liberal polity:

We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The “fusion of horizons” operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts.\textsuperscript{73}

Again, however, recognition of equal value depends upon shared standards. We cannot really judge another culture as worthy until we “suppose a fused horizon of standards.” In some sense, then, recognition is incomplete without the prior existence of shared background frameworks on which it can be based.

Taylor’s solution is thus to combine the ideal of universal human dignity with the notion of the value of cultural difference in order to articulate a vision of a less homogeneous liberal polity. The politics of recognition would therefore consist of a twofold operation: 1) coming to recognize the “authentic” life good or identity of another culture and 2) fusing that other culture’s life good with our own culture’s moral horizons. Ideally, then, Taylor has provided a vision of the type of differentiated society that the Hegelian idea of freedom demanded: a universal horizon of human dignity, or moral

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 66
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 72
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 67
background, encompassing a diversity of human goods. The goal of this differentiated society would also be twofold: both to accommodate cultural difference without homogenization, and also to ensure that previously misrecognized groups are afforded agency within a liberal polity. Does this picture hold up?

I would like to suggest that it does not. The picture of recognition that Taylor gives in his essay integrates both of the qualities of moral life that he elaborates throughout his work: the notion of moral sources and the ideal of authenticity. We recognize another person, and another culture, for a potentiality that is properly its own, or an authentic identity that it expresses through its particular life goods. These life goods play out against a background of hypergoods, such as universal justice and benevolence, that gives rise to a diversity of valid interpretations. The type of liberal polity that Taylor describes is undergirded by the compatibility of the analysis of moral goods and the ideal of authenticity. The unified horizon of moral sources ensures that the cultural diversity of life goods does not conflict with strong claims concerning equality and universal rights. Taylor’s faith in the ultimate similarity of different visions of the good life is again evident.

Yet the possibility of such agreement seems to be grounded on an essential confusion between two senses of recognition. As I noted before, Taylor first invokes recognition to describe the need to understand how certain strong evaluations shape our agency. This type of recognition, translated into the language of “The Politics of Recognition,” would line up with the recognition of the equal value of different cultural goods. But Taylor also makes a stronger, ontological claim about how these moral goods are constitutive of authentic, inwardly generated personal identities. Taylor seems to see
this elision as unproblematic, and even affirms the identity of these two forms of recognition: “Consider what we mean by identity. It is who we are, ‘where we’re coming from.’ As such *it is the background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense* (italics added).”  

74 But is it possible to draw a straight line from the moral backgrounds that make sense of a culture’s morally significant action *generally* and the *particular* way in which an individual engages in that kind of action? Taylor’s own account of authenticity seems to undermine this possibility. If recognition is a process through which an individual’s identity is actively shaped by dialogue with significant others, then the uncertainty surrounding whether an individual’s authentic identity is granted recognition would seem to permit various different negative and positive attitudes toward these backgrounds. It seems likely that individuals within cultures, while working out their identities through dialogue with significant others, do not simply “discover” their identities within cultural backgrounds but also actively transform those backgrounds. Taylor’s politics of recognition, however, seems to rely upon the stability of these frameworks. On the individual level, and more urgently on the cultural level, the purpose of recognition is to alleviate oppressive forms of misrecognition, or those instances in which different individuals within cultures, or cultures as a whole (insofar as one can refer to them as such), are forcibly assimilated to identities that are not their own. It does so by affording equal value to cultural goods that were not previously recognized. In treating those goods as the authentic identities of those cultures, or the authentic identities of individuals within them, Taylor’s version of recognition risks a *deeper* form of misrecognition: it risks homogenizing the different attitudes that it is possible to take toward those goods.

74 Ibid, 33-34
within the recognized culture, and covering over the way that morally significant action continually reshapes those goods.

A major part of the issue is, as I noted before, the fact that recognition presupposes recognizability. As Taylor often points out, judgments of the equal value of other cultures rest upon shared background frameworks. In other words, the condition of possibility of recognition is that this shared background renders recognized identities intelligible. Given Taylor’s commitment to a “fused horizon of standards,” this issue of intelligibility appears to me to be problematic. As Taylor construes it, in order to recognize another cultural good, we must be able to understand it against a common background. Yet, at the same time, it is the process of recognition that seems to construct this fused horizon of standards which is necessary to make recognition possible in the first place. One could imagine this as a virtuous circle rather than a vicious one, in which continued negotiations among cultures strengthened and expanded their shared backgrounds. This is not, however, how Taylor frames it. Rather, Taylor makes a stronger ontological claim, buttressed by an empirical claim, about the de facto existence of shared hypergoods that, existing transcendentally, remain inescapable and beyond reproach.

It is here that a potentially virtuous circle seems to become a vicious one. If, as we said, recognition presupposes recognizability, and that recognizability is guaranteed by preexisting shared backgrounds that recognition then confirms, then we would step outside of our own cultural milieus very little in the process of recognition. If moral backgrounds really are transcendental horizons that we must accept in order to have agency, it is hard to see how we would ever be able to temporarily displace or challenge
them in order to make room for other cultural goods. Instead, Taylor’s commitment to the overall similarity of these backgrounds, as well as the generally abstract character of hypergoods, seems ill-equipped to deal with cultural goods that do not fit comfortably within the Western liberal moral horizons. What intervention could such a theory of recognition make, for instance, in the confrontation between Western liberalism and Islamic culture? In treating these two cultures as coherent unities defined by ultimately similar hypergoods, Taylor’s account seems incapable of explaining the conflict-ridden nature of attempts to negotiate between these cultures. Indeed, his theory of recognition appears to simply replace Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” hypothesis with a “fusion of civilizations” theory; in either case, the two cultures are treated as monolithic backgrounds that either clash or coexist.

By forfeiting the tools to describe intercultural conflict, Taylor also risks a perhaps deeper problem surrounding his notion of agency. If agency is defined against broad moral backgrounds, which Taylor tends to construe as unified, coherent wholes, then there seems to be little room for individual autonomy within those horizons. Not only does Taylor fail to capture the actual, potentially conflict-ridden process through which struggles for recognition are conducted, the way he describes agency also seems to ensure that smaller-scale contestations and rearticulations of cultural backgrounds go unrecognized. If that which ensures the recognizability of an individual identity is simply the ontologically prior position of shared backgrounds, then it would be impossible, or at least very difficult, to capture the way that these horizons are often challenged and reinterpreted by individuals and groups within a culture. The process of recognizing another cultural good under Taylor’s framework would then involve yet another
misrecognition of the internal fractures within that culture and the various different stances that can be taken toward that good, stances which are always in the process of changing and being articulated in different ways. This possibility of multiple stances implies a related misrecognition of the individual persons within those cultures whose identities hinge upon contesting or displacing the cultural horizons they find themselves within.

In conclusion, the overall problem with Hegel and Taylor’s theories of recognition seems to me to center around this misunderstanding of agency. Both of them tend to construe recognition as, on the one hand, respect for a generic identity (whether it be Geist or moral backgrounds) and, on the other, respect for particular, authentic identity. Yet these latter forms of identity seem to rest comfortably within preexisting moral horizons, be they the horizons of a single culture or the even broader horizons of “hypergoods,” or Geist, and the goal of morally significant action in their picture seems to be to accept these backgrounds more or less as they are. As we saw, however, the process of recognition itself is often fraught with contingency, uncertainty, and even conflict. These qualities of struggles for recognition undermine Taylor’s picture of cultural horizons as unified, preexisting wholes. Rather, Hegel and Taylor disavow the conflict and uncertainty that accompanies the struggle to articulate a particular identity against broader moral backgrounds. Perhaps more seriously, they also seem to ignore material power relations that persist within and between cultures, making a “fusion of horizons” a difficult affair. Their pictures of particular difference thus become variations of a genus/species model, in which broader frameworks are divided up into stable pockets of particular identities.
It seems to me that both Adorno’s concept of nonidentity, as well as the more unstable qualities of the politics of recognition that I have brought out in this section, both suggest that another model of particular identity/difference would be more adequate. This model would have to show how horizons of recognition perpetually shift, how difference does not rest comfortably within the universal. More specifically, it would describe how morally significant action often involves the contestation and problematization of shared backgrounds as much as, or perhaps more than, the acceptance of them. To borrow a formulation from Gilles Deleuze, “Difference must be shown differing.”

Recognizing this uncertainty and contingency that attaches to morally significant action is essential to counter the risk of homogenization that attaches to the ideal of recognition, or so I would like to argue. The strength of Taylor’s account is its emphasis on how agency requires action within certain moral horizons rather than the frictionless movement of disengaged rationality. Its weakness is its double mischaracterization of the nature of these horizons and the type of intersubjective relations through which they unfold. Criticizing this mischaracterization now pushes me beyond a merely critical stance toward Hegelian models of mutual, equal recognition. My critique of Taylor suggests a different model of the unfolding of human freedom, implying, correlatively, a conception of political freedom distinct from Hegel and Taylor’s. It is this idea of freedom, predicated on an affirmation of the shifting, inadequate nature of horizons of recognition, that I will now try to elaborate through the work of Adorno.

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75 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 56
Freedom Through Nonidentity: Adorno’s Concept of Mimetic Recognition

Introduction: Two Readings of The Odyssey

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer provide a reading of the journey of Odysseus as the prototypical bourgeois individualist. Tempted by the “irresistible promise” of the Sirens’ song, Odysseus commands his men to bind him to the mast of his ship so that he may listen without peril. His sailors, meanwhile, must plug their ears with wax so that their rowing will continue undisturbed. The immeasurable joy of hearing the Sirens’ song is a privilege reserved for “the seigneur who allows the others to labor for themselves,” while Odysseus’s men “must row with all their strength.”76 The dichotomy between Odysseus and his sailors is understood as a forerunner of modern European class society, in which certain pleasures are reserved for the bourgeoisie while the proletarians “must ignore whatever lies to one side.” Odysseus is the exemplar of what Adorno will call “constitutive subjectivity,” the idealist notion of the subject who understands all of empirical reality as identical with subjective categories—the Hegelian identity between the actual and the rational: “The rulers experience existence, with which they need no longer concern themselves, only as a substratum, and hence wholly ossify into the condition of the commanding self.”77

But before Odysseus opens the dialectic of master and slave, he is also the Hegelian man of self-certainty. Odysseus, like the Hegelian subject, struggles to maintain the purity of his self-identity over and against the powers of nature and myth. Through the “trickery” of instrumental reason, the hero is able to conquer both the gods and the

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77 Ibid, 35
manifold spirits of an antagonistic nature: “The seafarer Odysseus cheats the natural deities, as does the civilized traveler who offers them colored beads in exchange for ivory.”78 With *The Odyssey*, Western reason defines itself in opposition to myth, the specter of primitive magic with which it struggles, and through the use of instrumental cunning gains mastery over nature. Yet this mastery is purchased at the cost of complicity with that which reason disavows. Only by carefully imitating and adapting to nature and myth—or in the case of the Sirens, simply enjoying it—is Odysseus able to emerge victorious in his struggles. Though he overcomes mythical nature, Odysseus relies upon “mimesis,” the process of adapting to nature by imitating it which Adorno and Horkheimer see as typical of a “prerational,” understanding of the world expressed in shamanic magic:

> Only consciously contrived adaptation to nature brings nature under the control of the physically weaker…The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualizing nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn. Imitation enters into the service of domination inasmuch as even man is anthropomorphized for man.79

The dialectic between mimesis and rationality is central to Adorno and Horkheimer’s philosophical enterprise, and we will have opportunity to explore it further later on. The object of his and Horkheimer’s critique here, however, is clear. The rational man who treats all nature negatively, who struggles to assert his independence by mastering the natural object, lies at the root of the domination intrinsic to capitalist society. Odysseus defines an attitude toward nature that is constitutive of Hegel’s concept of freedom: it is only by establishing one’s independence from otherness that one can be achieve liberation. Yet, just as the bondsman in Hegel’s dialectic is inexorably drawn

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78 Ibid, 49
79 Ibid, 57
back to the mimetic activity of laboring upon particular objects, Odysseus also sacrifices his independence in order to achieve it. He adapts to nature, allowing it, in the case of the Sirens, to infect his entire being, in order to separate himself from it once again.

There is another contemporary reading of Odysseus’s journey, however, that applies just as well to the problem of Hegelian freedom: the reading given by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas understands Odysseus’s travels as a narrative version of Platonic *anamnesis*, or the process of recalling metaphysical knowledge that the subject already has from a primal encounter with the Forms. For Levinas, what is determinative of *The Odyssey* is precisely the act of returning. The purpose of Odysseus’s journey is to return to Ithaca, that ancestral land which he already possesses. Due to the pressing need to return, he takes nothing from the mythical figures whom he encounters, but is instead driven to overcome them and be free of them. This parallels the adventures of Western reason, which reproduces in the object only what was already in the subject, a process that Adorno and Horkheimer identify in Kant: “According to Kant, philosophic judgment aims at the new; and yet it recognizes nothing new, since it always merely recalls what reason has deposited in the object.” The world, in this analysis, becomes a gigantic analytic proposition, a tautology, from which reason takes nothing in its journey back to itself.

It seems to me that both of these readings of the *Odyssey* illuminate important features of Hegel’s dialectic of mutual recognition. In the first place, the Hegelian subject enters into the dialectic of recognition only to receive his own self back from it; he, like Odysseus, seeks nothing but self-certainty from his encounter with otherness. In the

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81 Ibid, 26
second place, in always seeking only himself in recognition, the Hegelian subject is unreceptive to the specificity of the Other. This dynamic exists in both Hegel and Taylor. For Hegel, the primary object of recognition is *Geist*, the universal spirit that the subject already implicitly possesses: the subject thus attributes only what he already has to the Other. In Taylor, similarly, the subject recognizes in another culture only a similar moral good, a shared background framework within which he already moves and which is “ontogenetically prior” to his individuality.

Adorno’s work gives a powerful critique of this model of constitutive subjectivity. In this chapter, I will first examine Adorno’s epistemological critique of the genus/species concept of difference that I’ve argued is determinative for Hegel and Taylor’s ideas of recognition, focusing specifically on Adorno’s concept of “nonidentity”. I will then show in the second part how Adorno links this understanding of difference to the repressive power dynamics of bourgeois society, specifically to its tendency toward integration and disregard for individuality and particularity. In the third part, I will argue that the Hegelian understanding of recognition—the understanding that I called the “second side” of Hegel in the first chapter—actually corrupts our relations with others and undermines the possibility of a more liberating form of recognition. In the fourth and final section, I suggest that Adorno’s concept of mimesis gives a more adequate understanding of recognition and freedom in contrast with models that rely on genus/species difference.
The Concept of Negative Dialectics

As we saw in the dialectic of self-certainty and the idea of the political state, for Hegel, dialectics have a clear directionality: the particular moments of spirit are convicted of incompleteness, since their true identity lies in the absolute. Similarly, in Taylor, one’s authentic self is only expressed fully against a background of shared moral goods, which are often generic and abstract. In this way, discourses of recognition argue that both self-certainty and proper recognition of others is only possible once Spirit has reconciled “I” and “We,” or once individual identity is harmonized with broader, shared moral frameworks. A similar trope can be found in Hegel’s philosophy of history. Here, individual historical events are revealed to be partial but necessary moments in the completion of world spirit in the nation-state. For Adorno, however, it is no longer possible to treat individuality as incomplete due to its separation from the universal, nor is it possible to view history as progressing dialectically toward the realization of Spirit. In the face of Auschwitz, the sublation of the particular in the universal appears twisted. No history could be considered “progressive” if the gas chambers are one relatively inconsequential moment on the path to realized freedom. Further, Auschwitz is not an aberration, but in fact a consequence of the historical triumph of Western reason: “The horror of our day has arisen from the intrinsic dynamics of our own history, it cannot be described as exceptional.”\(^{82}\) As Adorno famously declares in *Negative Dialectics*, “[n]o universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from

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the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized humanity
poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity.”83

Adorno clearly sees the idealist concept of constitutive subjectivity, exemplified by the struggles of Odysseus, as partially responsible for this trend. Like Odysseus’s journey, the form of reason embodied in the death camps is characterized by “the all-subjugating identity principle” which is hostile toward that which “eludes rational planning.” A form of reason that cannot treat otherness as anything but an opponent to be overcome on the path to self-certainty results, in Adorno’s view, in violent retribution against that which does not fall under conventional concepts: the “nonidentical.” In order to understand Adorno’s justification for this view, along with his concept of the nonidentical, it is necessary first to return to his recasting of dialectics on an epistemological level.

Adorno sees dialectics as crucially important in their negative moment, characterized by the tension between thesis and antithesis. The negative moment of dialectics rests upon the “spontaneous receptivity” of consciousness to the object.84 The strength of dialectics thus lies in its receptivity and minute attention to the demands that an object makes upon knowing consciousness, or the antagonism between the material object and the concepts that consciousness applies to it. This receptivity involves what Adorno will call “nonidentity”: the object presents certain demands to the knowing subject which that subject cannot meet within its given conceptual framework. Dialectics thus forces the subject to move past the concepts with which it would conventionally function in order to attempt to do justice to the object. What is essential to dialectics,

then, is this struggle between subject and object, similar to the tense and fearful labor of the bondsman.

The horizon within which Hegel understands this process, however, is that of eventual subject-object unity in *Geist*. Adorno’s epistemological argument against Hegel’s subject-object unity is twofold. First, from this inadequacy of the subject’s conceptions in the face of the object, Hegel infers that there must be a stage at which, instead, concept and object eventually correspond. However, Hegel can only introduce this directionality into dialectics if he has assumed subject-object unity as an endpoint from the start. Adorno makes this point forcefully with respect to Hegel’s *Logic*, where Hegel “refuses to begin with Something instead of Being. The entire work, which seeks to expound the primacy of the subject, is thus in a subjective sense idealistically prejudiced.” For Adorno, Hegel’s choice to begin with “Being” rather than “Something” signifies his insistence on dealing with conceptual generality rather than specific empirical entities. If Hegel both begins and ends with the most general concept—*Geist*—without dealing with these particular entities adequately, then his method is circular.

In itself, however, this objection is inadequate: Hegel often acknowledges the circular nature of his thought, describing the process of spirit as a return to its original self-identity from which it was alienated. The second part of Adorno’s objection is what gives strength to the first. Adorno argues that if Hegel’s dialectic is circular—if the subject is the first and last principle—then Hegel’s method betrays its promise to attend to the specificity of the object and preserve this specificity even as it is negated; this is Adorno’s “immanent critique” of Hegelian dialectics. As Adorno puts it:

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85 *Negative Dialectics*, 135
When the contemplating spirit presumes to show that everything that exists is commensurable with itself…spirit sets itself up as an ontological ultimate, even if at the same time it grasps the untruth of this, that of the abstract a priori, and attempts to do away with its own fundamental thesis…The Hegelian subject-object is subject.  

If the purpose of dialectics is to yield to the demands of the object, then it will fail by its own standards if it reduces all objectivity to the identifying power of the subject. This is especially the case, as we have seen, in the lord/bondsman dialectic, when the bondsman’s struggles with specific, material existence disappear in the final realization of freedom. This inadequacy in Hegel’s dialectics of self-certainty is not lost on Adorno: “Does not the retreat to this supposedly higher authority signify the regression of the subject, which had earlier won its freedom only with great efforts, with infinite pains?”  

If this is the case, dialectics would stand convicted of being a form of foundationalism, its express opponent.  

Adorno characterizes his immanent critique of the dialectic as an attack on the concept of totality: “The fullness of the real, as totality, does not let itself be subsumed under the idea of being which might allocate meaning to it; nor can the idea of existing being be built up out of the elements of reality.”  

The idea of nonidentity expresses a paradox central to Adorno’s thought, one that corresponds with the tension between reason and mimesis which I alluded to when describing Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of *The Odyssey*. This paradox consists in a dialectical relation between attentiveness to particularity and reason’s need to impose general concepts upon the particular object.

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86 “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” 13  
The first side of this paradox involves the requirement that thought deal with materiality. In order to have thought at all, thought must have contact with entities: “Without ‘something’ there is no thinkable formal logic, and there is no way to cleanse this logic of its metaphysical rudiment.” This “indissoluble something” is the singularity of the object that presents itself to thought, that is, its specificity and uniqueness as an individual existent. The form of cognition that is best suited to dealing with particular objects, however, is decidedly not the process of subsuming objects under categories, a process typical of Western, metaphysical reason. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno alludes to another form of cognition that he calls “discrimination”: “A discriminating man is one who in the matter and its concept can distinguish even the infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept; discrimination alone gets down to the infinitesimal.” Elsewhere, however, Adorno terms this process “mimesis,” and it is this term which I will adopt from here on. Mimesis refers to a pre-rational process of adapting to an object by imitating it. One should not understand imitation, however, as the exact reproduction of the object in the concept; that, for Adorno, is not possible. Thus “[m]imetic behavior does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something.” The mimetic subject (typified for Adorno by ritual magic that imitates nature in order to stave off the wrath of the gods) illuminates the specific features of an object that are lost in generic concepts by, at least temporarily, surrendering its conventional, subjective categories. Mimesis is thus seen as a critical activity of illumination rather than conceptualization: it brings into the foreground the nonconceptual traces of an object in order to demonstrate the need to go beyond

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89 *Negative Dialectics*, 135  
90 Ibid, 45  
conventional categories of the understanding. Mimesis brings forth what in the object is nonidentical to the concept. This nonidentity implies that there can be no final horizon of recognition of the object that is not necessarily founded upon its opposite, the inevitable misrecognition of the object: “Since the basic character of every general concept dissolves in the face of distinct entity, a total philosophy is no longer to be hoped for.”

The nonidentity of the object does not, however, imply that thought is useless. “We can see through the identity principle, but we cannot think without identifying. Any definition is identification.” We cannot think otherwise than conceptually, but this does not mean that we cannot try to construct concepts that adhere more closely to the demands of the object. For Adorno, the difficulty with the “identitarian thinking” that Hegel both exemplifies and undermines is that it emphasizes conceptuality to the complete exclusion of mimesis: “The multitudinous affinities between existents are suppressed in the single relation between the subject who bestows meaning and the meaningless object.” Therefore we should not choose between extreme alternatives. We cannot treat the subject as adequate to the concept, nor can we treat the nonidentical as the Kantian noumenon, which concepts cannot touch. Instead, the relation between thought and object is dialectical: the nonidentical is always already mediated by the concept, which must be convicted of inadequacy. Adorno does not settle for a negative theology that would preserve the sanctity of the absolutely individual object against the concept. Indeed, this hypostatization of the nonidentical is simply the other side of the same coin as the hypostatization of constitutive subjectivity: “absolute individuality is a

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92 Negative Dialectics, 136
93 Ibid, 149
94 Dialectic of Enlightenment, 10
product of the very process of abstraction that is begun for universality’s sake.” In other words, treating nonidentity as an ultimate, ineffable beyond already turns it into a universal concept, something that has no particular characteristics that present themselves as material for mimesis. Instead, thought is defined by the dialectical give and take of subject and object, neither of which can be extricated from or reduced to the other.

The mimetic task of thought is to illuminate the specific side of the object, “the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden.” Through mimesis, the object is allowed to gradually reveal its specific history, which situates it as a fragment of the real in relation to other specific fragments and moments: “only in traces and ruins [philosophy] prepared to hope that it will ever come across correct and just reality.” Mimesis thus relies upon a strong notion of relationality: instead of imposing concepts upon the object, categorizing, which hypostatizes the independence of both subject and object, thought attends to the specific differences of an object that gradually constitute it throughout its history. This form of cognition seeks to unlock the “unintentional” side of the object, that which is buried in its simple self-presentation as a self-identical conceptual unity. The nonidentical side of the object is allowed to break through the identitarian myth of constitutive subjectivity.

What is crucial about mimesis is that it implies that nonidentity is respected in the process of conceptual recognition. By surrendering to the object, thought also surrenders its faith in a horizon of recognition that, as a genus, would subsume the various species of subject and object under its heading. In reducing specific individuals to manifestations of a broader genus, cognition actually misrecognizes them by failing to capture their

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95 Negative Dialectics, 162
96 Ibid
97 “The Actuality of Philosophy,” 24
specificity. In doing so, cognition unconsciously reproduces whatever forms are already
given for recognizing objects; it mimics existing social reality and fails at its critical task:

The task of cognition does not consist in mere apprehension, classification, and
calculation, but in the determinate negation of each im-mediacy…Factuality wins
the day; cognition is restricted to its repetition; and thought becomes mere
tautology. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the
more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns
to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude.98

In relying too heavily upon genus/species difference, upon rationality as categorization,
reason again gives itself back to the mimesis of ancient magic that, as we saw with
Odysseus, it originally tabooed. Through abandoning the pre-rational, mimetic
component of thought, thought resigns itself to mimicking whatever social forms already
exist. It sputters out in quietism.

The new horizon of thought suggested by Adorno is one which subject and object
never quite exist on a common plane: “Contemplation without violence, the source of all
the joy of truth, presupposes that he who contemplates does not absorb the object into
himself: distanced nearness.”99 The critical task of knowledge is consequently founded
less upon recognition of the genus in the object than upon conceptual misrecognition and
acknowledgment of that misrecognition. That is, conceptuality, in giving itself over to its
mimetic moment, acknowledges that the categories of recognition it applies to the object
must be criticized by a temporary surrender of subjectivity to the object. Only then can
the subject, instead of receiving back nothing but what it already has, actually learn
something new from the object. Insofar as misrecognition opens up the possibility of
grasping the object through mimesis, it is productive and constitutive of knowledge.

98 Dialectic of Enlightenment, 27
Negative Dialectics and Social Critique

Knowledge relies upon dialectical tension and, correspondingly, conceptual misrecognition; but idealism, by relying upon a version of genus/species difference in its concept of recognition, fails to acknowledge this. Idealism thus tends to manifest itself as rage against the nonidentical, the alien element that cannot be assimilated to the concept:

Idealism…gives unconscious sway to the ideology that the not-I, l’autrui, and finally all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so that the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour it without misgivings…The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism.100

More specifically, idealism reflects a bourgeois social order dominated by instrumental rationality and what Adorno calls the barter principle. It is with respect to these notions in particular that genus/species rationality unconsciously mimics existing conceptual forms. I will unpack both instrumental rationality and the barter principle in turn.

Instrumental rationality, the type of cunning rationality that Odysseus exemplifies, is a type of reason employed in order to accomplish practical ends. As such, instrumental reason does not involve, for instance, reflections on the nature of a just society, but rather limits itself to analyzing an object for the purposes of using it for specific projects. It is this type of dominative, calculating that Adorno sees as constitutive of bourgeois culture:

[T]his kind of rationality exists only in so far as it can subjugate something different from and alien to itself. We can put it even more strongly: it can exist only by identifying everything that is caught up in its machinery, by leveling it and by defining it in its alterity as something that resists it and…something that is hostile to it. In other words…antagonism, conflict, is in fact postulated in this principle of dominant universality, of unreflecting rationality, in precisely the same way as antagonism to a subservient group is postulated in a system of rule. And the stage at which self-awareness might lead this rationality to bring about change—that stage has still not been reached.101

100 Negative Dialectics, 23
101 History and Freedom, 13
Here, the distinction between the apparently *substantive* reason of Hegel’s ideal political state and bourgeois instrumental reason appears tenuous: both rely upon the reduction of things that are alien or different to conceptual machinery, subsuming them under the genus of the concept. Adorno, with Horkheimer, thus describes instrumental rationality as a product of Western Enlightenment, of which Hegel is a reluctant member: “From now on, matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect.”

As we have seen, this attitude has its root in the independent subject’s domination of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer give a picture of primitive freedom as the struggle for self-preservation that leads the subject to value the domination of nature and alterity as a form of rationality conducive to survival. This struggle ends by hypostatizing the independence of subjectivity from nature, a move that violently covers over the subject’s reliance upon nonidentity: “The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things…is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over disenchanted nature.”

Instrumental reason thus tends toward antagonism, the conflict between the powers of reason and an alien nature or otherness with which it struggles.

But in a twist of fate (the same twist that Hegel’s lord must undergo), instrumental reason, which began by asserting the subject’s independence, actually results in its enslavement: “this progressive instrumental reason is the embodiment of the antagonism that consists in the relation between the supposedly free human subject, who

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102 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6
103 Ibid., 4
for that reason is in fact not free at all, and the things on which his freedom is built.”

The rise of instrumental reason creates an increasingly integrative society that exerts more and more control over the individual’s identity: “the historical coercion which moulds human beings enters into the very core of their psyche and their subjectivity is in a sense shaped by this socialization process.” The integrative society, founded upon an antagonism between man and nature, turns increasingly against the individual who was its original mythic hero. Individuals lose the critical distance necessary to achieve reflective freedom insofar as they are identified with the social totality. Thus the notion of the unified genus or fused horizon of human subjectivity, which appears as the protagonist in both Hegel and Taylor’s accounts of recognition, becomes in Adorno the very process of an integrative society that represses the freedom of individuals.

More specifically—to move to the second notion I promised to unpack—identitarian logic is embodied in the unique social order of bourgeois capitalism: “The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification.” The concept of exchange as that which imposes false equality and identity derives from Marx’s “fetishism of commodities,” but Adorno usually describes it, following Georg Lukács, as “reification.” Reification, for Adorno, refers to the way in which instrumental rationality tears the object—in this case both social objects, such as commodities, and human subjects—away from its nonidentity and forces it into conformity with the concept of exchange value. Social objects are removed from their original contexts, and their particular features are reduced to the abstraction of the money form.

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104 History and Freedom, 17
105 Ibid, 71
106 Negative Dialectics, 146
The clearest formulation of this critique is in the essay “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” though it is a prominent theme throughout all of Adorno’s work. For Hegel, reconciliation of subject and object involves identification with *Geist* and recognition of both self and other as realizations of *Geist*. This universality, which, as we have seen, is divorced from the nonidentity of the particular, mirrors the reifying process of social labor in bourgeois society:

> [T]his universality is an expression of the social nature of labor, an expression both precise and concealed from itself for the sake of the general idealist thesis; labor only becomes labor as something for something else, something commensurable with other things, something that transcends the contingency of the individual subject.  

The principle of equivalence thus hypostatizes society as an abstract totality over and against the individual, who becomes a detached, exchangeable subject. This complicity of idealist philosophy in the exchange relation “dictates the untruth in Hegel…the denial of the nonidentical in totality, no matter how much the nonidentical receives its due in the reflection of any particular judgment.”

By positing spirit as universality, Hegelian thought mirrors the way in which social labor excludes the nonidentical in material reality. In doing so, “the great classical philosophy literally passes the quintessence of coercion off as freedom.”

Now that I have examined both of these key concepts in Adorno’s understanding of bourgeois society, I am in a position to describe how this social analysis fits into Adorno’s epistemological critique. As we have seen, the idea of mutual recognition in Hegel’s dialectic rests upon the possibility of the individual’s identification with the universal embodied in the concrete ethical life, the identification of the “I” and the “We”.

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107 “Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy,” 18
108 Ibid, 24
109 Ibid, 26
Taylor’s concept of recognition follows this structure, chaining an individual or a culture’s authentic identity, which is actualized in “webs of interlocution,” to reconciliation with generic, shared moral backgrounds. The analysis of nonidentity already suggested that such a reconciliation is impossible without an affirmation of its opposite—misrecognition—which grounds any concept. The implications of this epistemological theory for social and political relations now appear more serious. If Adorno is correct in linking the genus/species model of conceptualizing particular difference to a repressive social organization, then Hegelian theories of recognition would not be emancipatory. Rather, the way that both Hegel and Taylor frame recognition, as the recognition of the genus that acts behind and through the individual, would be an expression of reification in bourgeois society. This form of recognition would reinforce the exchange principle, which in the unrelenting “cash nexus” of capitalist society increasingly appears to be the only real common genus under which two subjects can be recognized on equal terms. Only by capitulating to the principle of equivalence, and thereby riding roughshod over a mimetic relation to particular features of the Other or the object, is the kind of generic recognition described by Hegel and Taylor possible.

Consequently, instead of expressing the possibility of freedom, the identification with abstract, common backgrounds would be the opposite of freedom: the repression of the individual subject by a conceptual whole that asserts its independence from nonidentity. An adequate concept of freedom in a social or political community would require nonidentity on the sides of both subject and object: the object’s irreducibility to conceptual schema, and the subject’s struggle to distinguish itself from a repressive social
totality that militates against all that is alien in the name of a universal genus. In this way, freedom and respect for alterity mutually imply one another insofar as both are possible only through the critique of conventional horizons of recognition. It is to these topics in Adorno’s works—relations with others and the concept of freedom—that I now turn.

**Nonidentity and Being with Others**

It is primarily in *Minima Moralia* that Adorno begins to extend his social critique of idealism more deeply into relations with others. In this work of aphorisms, he attempts a microscopic analysis of certain social relations, such as family life, friendship, and gift-giving. Throughout this analysis, he tries to show how the identity principle has infected even the most basic social institutions. As Adorno describes it,

> It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a through-station, and finally comes all to quickly to terms with suffering and death for the sake of a reconciliation occurring merely in reflection—in the last analysis, the bourgeois coldness that is only too willing to underwrite the inevitable.¹¹⁰

The willingness to pass over the mimetic moment of thought, in which the subject attends to the singularity of the object, is also manifested as a reduction of suffering and death to the inevitable march of history and society. The rule of universality, at least insofar as it becomes faith in historical progress and the rationality of existing social institutions, masks a pernicious quietism.

Before launching further into this analysis, however, it would be helpful to distinguish between the concept of nonidentity as applied to epistemological objects and as applied to other human subjects. Adorno tends to slide freely between the two, often to

¹¹⁰ *Minima Moralia*, 74
the point of eliding them; the identitarian logic that mutilates the particular object also
tends to mutilate the particular human subject in a similar fashion. While I believe that
this elision results in some imprecision in Adorno’s analysis, it does not seem to me to be
a fundamental problem in his critique. Indeed, I would like to argue that the concept of
nonidentity applies even more forcefully to attempts to recognize other subjects. As we
saw in the sections on Hegel and Taylor, the identity of a human subject is constituted
through an active process of recognition and dialogue that is continually unfolding.
Whether we conceive of the subject as the bondsman who labors negatively upon
particular objects or the linguistic subject who defines him or herself through webs of
interlocution, subjectivity is understood as the active shaping and reshaping of itself and
the objects and persons it encounters. While the epistemological object remains
essentially inert, changing slowly through the social history within which it is ensconced,
the nonidentity of the human subject entails that subject’s ability to actively contest the
horizons of recognition applied to it, a dynamic that came out most clearly in my analysis
of Taylor on authenticity. If this is the case, then Adorno’s critique of identitarian logic is
even stronger with respect to relations among human subjects than relations between
subject and object. Indeed, it implies that entering into a mimetic relation with the Other
would be a continual engagement that always entailed the possibility of a new break with
established horizons of recognition. I will explore this dynamic later in this section.

In addition to disregarding the nonidentity of the epistemological object to the
concept, then, identitarian thinking also, and more egregiously, disregards the nonidentity
of the individual to society. In Minima Moralia, Adorno discusses this disregard in
relation to the institution of private property and how it is reflected in the discipline of psychology:

In psychology, in the bottomless fraud of mere inwardness, which is not by accident concerned with the ‘properties’ of men, is reflected what bourgeois society has practiced for all time with outward property…The individual has been, as it were, merely invested with property by the class, and those in control are ready to take it back as soon as universalization of property seems likely to endanger its principle, which is precisely that of withholding. Psychology repeats in the case of properties what was done to property. It expropriates the individual by allocating him its happiness.¹¹¹

Property involves a conceptual and social schema in which each object is given its assigned place within the continuum of Being and, by extension, society—a social logos. Similarly, human subjects are measured, comprehended, and assigned societal roles and prescribed forms of satisfaction. Property is thus an institutionalized form of instrumental rationality in which each individual is utilized for the ends of the social whole, a dynamic that Hegel charts in the civil society stage of Objective Spirit.

Here, Adorno’s protest is forceful: “tenderness between people is nothing other than awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose, a solace still glimpsed by those embroiled in purposes; a legacy of old privileges promising a privilege-free condition.”¹¹² Relations with others that are defined by instrumentality—and by extension in Adorno’s critique, universality detached from particularity—already betray a tendency to treat the Other as an object. Adorno furnishes us with a concrete example in his analysis of gift-giving. Giving gifts requires minute attention to the Other just as epistemological reflection requires minute attention to the object: “Real giving had its joy in imagining the joy of the receiver. It means choosing, expending time, going out of

¹¹¹ Ibid, 64
¹¹² Ibid, 41
one’s way, thinking of the other as a subject: the opposite of distraction.\textsuperscript{113} What is meant here by “thinking of the other as subject” is precisely the opposite of what Hegel means by subject: not generality, or pure self-consciousness, but a specific subjectivity with particular defining characteristics. The exchange principle, which falls on the side of generality, obviates the need for giving. It reinforces the bourgeois social structures in which individuals are made interchangeable by reduction to the conceptual absolute of abstract labor-power, structures which make it difficult to attend to the singularity of the Other. Adorno sees this reflected in political life and argues that it results in an inversion of justice:

Liberality that accords men their rights indiscriminately, terminates in annihilation, as does the will of the majority that ill uses a minority, and so makes a mockery of democracy while acting in accordance with its principles. Indiscriminate kindness towards all carries the constant threat of indifference and remoteness to each, attitudes communicated in turn to the whole. Injustice is the medium of true justice.\textsuperscript{114}

It is here that Taylor’s theory of recognition would attempt an intervention. It is indeed, say proponents of recognition, an indifferent, purely procedural liberalism that results in “indifference and remoteness” toward particular cultural differences. This is precisely the problem that recognition seeks to rectify. Yet the abstract way in which Taylor’s theory proceeds suggests that his version of recognition will simply reproduce rather than challenge this tendency in liberal justice. The recognition that Taylor advocates does not attend to the singularity of the Other who must be recognized, but instead treats his or her “authentic identity” as essentially an extension of a generic moral good. In doing so, his idea of recognition follows the same logic that Adorno criticizes: the \textit{logos} of the property relation that allocates individuals and groups their predefined

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 42
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 77
locations within the total society. Within this framework, human relationships are not valued, but become exchangeable, a tendency that Adorno describes perhaps most powerfully with respect to love relationships:

> Once wholly a possession, the loved person is no longer really looked at. Abstraction in love is the complement of exclusiveness, which manifests itself deceptively as the opposite of abstract, a clinging to this one unique being. But such possessiveness loses its hold on its object precisely through turning into an object, and forfeits the person whom it debases to be ‘mine’. If people were no longer possessions, they could no longer be exchanged. *True affection would be one that speaks specifically to the other, and becomes attached to beloved features and not to the idol of personality*, the reflected image of possession (italics added).\(^\text{115}\)

In following this logic of the exchange relation, Hegel and Taylor’s ideas of recognition set up a relation of false nearness between two objects mediated through a concept—*Geist* or moral goods—that misrecognizes them. Adorno opposes distance in relations with others to this false nearness: “Estrangement shows itself precisely in the elimination of distance between people.”\(^\text{116}\) Distance in human relationships is the parallel of respect for nonidentity in epistemological relationships. On the one hand, through active critique, the subject must distance him or herself from social relations that privilege false and formulaic kindness: routine kindness, tact, manners, etc. On the other hand, the subject must respect the Other’s singularity by refusing to assimilate him or her to a preestablished horizon of recognition and the artificial social relations that institutionalize such a horizon.

As a corrective to theories of recognition, Adorno’s idea of relations with others thus suggests incorporating mimesis into conceptual understanding of the Other. Mimesis, as we saw, entails the process of assimilating oneself to the Other, of temporarily surrendering one’s conceptual framework in order to put oneself into a

\(^{115}\) Ibid, 79
\(^{116}\) Ibid, 41
relation with specific features of the Other. In epistemology, this was seen as a critical task, and it is no less critical in interpersonal or cultural recognition: “Distance is not a safety-zone but a field of tension.”

Distance, understood as the process of dissociating one’s relation with another from conventional forms, allows the specific features of the Other that transgress these forms, to break through conceptual horizons of recognition. The critical task of mimesis thus reveals the specific history of the Other and calls attention to the way that the bourgeois social totality mutilates his or her particularity. The process of recognizing another person is thus based on a critical dialectic between conceptuality and mimesis, a process that Adorno characterizes most incisively with respect to art:

The dialectic of mimesis and construction resembles its logical prototype in that the one realizes itself only in the other, not in some space between them. Construction is not a corrective of expression, nor is it the shoring up of expression by means of objectification, but is something that has to emerge in an unplanned way from the mimetic impulse.

Mimetic recognition thus has a twofold task. On the one hand, it must respond “in an unplanned way” to a specific case of misrecognition, that is, a specific situation in which a particular identity is mutilated by the social totality. In this instance, it undertakes the critical task of breaking through preestablished horizons of recognition in order to make space for a particular identity to express itself. On the other hand, mimetic recognition gradually reconstructs a new horizon of recognition by assimilating itself to the specific features of the misrecognized Other. By attending to, for instance, the specific histories and fault lines within other cultures and refusing to treat them, as Taylor does, as monolithic wholes, mimesis illuminates new ways for specific individuals to

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117 Ibid, 127
118 *Aesthetic Theory*, 65
make manifest their difference from repressive societal or cultural totalities. In order for this mimetic form of recognition to work, one must be able to accept the Other’s alterity without violently reducing it to the concept. That is, one cannot treat a generic horizon, such as *Geist* or a moral good, as “ontogenetically prior” to the Other’s specific difference. Instead, mimetic recognition criticizes those prior frameworks in order to allow the Other’s specificity to break through:

Only by the recognition of distance in our neighbor is strangeness alleviated: accepted into consciousness. The presumption of undiminished nearness present from the first, however, the flat denial of strangeness, does the other supreme wrong, virtually negates him as a particular human being and therefore the humanity in him, ‘counts him in,’ incorporates him in the inventory of property.\(^{119}\)

The violence of “counting [the Other] in,” of placing him or her in a social hierarchy, militates against that which cannot be assimilated, that which bears too much of a trace of alterity. This hearkens back to my concern with Taylor’s concept of cultural difference, which seemed ill-equipped to deal with serious conflicts over interpretations of moral background goods. Adorno sees the priority of conceptual nearness reflected in social violence that excludes an “inauthentic” Other who falls outside of the concept, using language that mirrors Taylor’s terminology of authenticity and originality:

In [the concept of genuineness] dwells the notion of the supremacy of the original over the derived. This notion, however, is always linked with social legitimism. All ruling strata claim to be the oldest settlers, autochthonous. The whole philosophy of inwardness, with its professed contempt for the world, is the last sublimation of the brutal, barbaric lord whereby he who was there first has the greatest rights; and the priority of the self is as untrue as that of all who feel at home where they live.\(^{120}\)

Here we can see the same refusal of consciousness to accept anything that disturbs the stability of its dwelling that we saw with respect to epistemological consciousness,

\(^{119}\) *Minima Moralia*, 182
\(^{120}\) Ibid, 155
Odysseus’s same, inexorable journey back to Ithaca. For Adorno, this is on a deep level the same violence of fascism, which hypostatizes a particular, such as race, and makes it a universal, a metaphysical homeland from which alterity must be driven out. Identitarian logic, by proclaiming the possibility of a final, fused horizon of recognition that subsumes particularity, risks repeating the deeply metaphysical violence of fascism: of original against derived, authentic against inauthentic, self against Other.

Thought, and recognition, must act differently after Auschwitz. Recognition should incorporate the critical, mimetic moment of nonidentity, which demands that cognition attend to the specificity of the Other rather than assimilating him or her to a generic background. In doing so, recognition would acknowledge the provisional nature of the conceptual horizons that it applies to Others, understanding that mimesis might present an unanticipated break with them. This is especially necessary with respect to cultural recognition. The genus/species model of difference risks treating other cultural goods as too similar to our familiar, Western morals, a forced familiarity that ignores conflicts within those goods as well as cultural goods that may not fit comfortably within conventional moral frameworks. Mimetic recognition, in breaking with the rule of genus/species difference, requires us to treat difference as restless within the genus, as always contesting and transforming the background frameworks that we take for granted. This attentiveness to the specificity of struggles to disidentify from existing cultural backgrounds prevents recognition from repeating misrecognition and violence: “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the
screams of its victims.”¹²¹ In the next section, I will argue that these struggles for disidentification not only prevent misrecognition of the Other, but also reveal possibilities for political freedom.

**Mimetic Freedom**

The totalizing tendency that Adorno diagnoses in both Western capitalist society and the Soviet society of his time, which is correlated with a genus/species model of conceptual difference, marginalizes whatever presents itself as nonidentical. This “spell” of total society, however, cannot smoothly integrate nonidentity, and thus it also tends to produce its opposite:

> The straighter a society’s course for the totality that is reproduced in the spellbound subjects, the deeper its tendency to dissociation. This threatens the life of the species as much as it disavows the spell cast over the whole, the false identity of subject and object. The universal that compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument, is working against itself, for its substance is the life of the particular; without the particular, the universal declines into an abstract, separate, eradicable form.¹²²

In the night in which all cows are black of total society, individuals lose their distinct identities. Simultaneously, however, the “splintering” of the particular reveals to the individual, implicitly or explicitly¹²³, the deceptiveness of bourgeois universality. It proves that the triumph of total society is purchased at the cost of the specific content of individuality, thus emptying individuals of the defining characteristics of their identities. Despite his pessimistic view of this situation, it is in this implicit antagonism between the individual and total society that Adorno tentatively sees the possibility of freedom. In this

¹²¹ *Negative Dialectics*, 365
¹²² Ibid, 346
¹²³ One might think of the experience of alienation as an implicit understanding of the way that bourgeois society tends to hypostatize and isolate the individual as an abstract entity. Alienation would be an incipient understanding of the pervasiveness of reification, waiting to be made explicit through a process of critiquing total society.
section, I will attempt to piece together an Adornian idea of freedom that relies upon the
ccept of mimesis that, as we have seen, goes beyond conceptual recognition. Mimetic
recognition, as I have argued, entails a willingness to leave one’s conceptual dwelling
and open oneself to one’s affinities with a specific Other. For Adorno, this mimetic
moment constitutes the negative, critical foundation of freedom: it allows the isolated
individual to glimpse that which lies outside of the conceptual totality to which he or she
is chained. In connection with the idea of the “spell” of totality, I will describe what I see
as Adorno’s two main criticisms the sort of recognitive freedom that I have been
analyzing.\footnote{Adorno’s criticism of these concepts of freedom in \textit{Negative Dialectics} proceeds largely through a
critique of Kant, not Hegel. Clearly the Kantian and Hegelian ideas of freedom are not the same. Indeed, it
was Hegel who strongly criticized the Kantian morality of conscience, arguing that it had to be embodied in
the ethical substance, or \textit{Sittlichkeit}. What Adorno mainly objects to in Kant, however, is the notion of
freedom as \textit{recognizing} the rational law that undergirds one’s agency. In this way, Kant acts as a proximate
opponent through whom it becomes possible to criticize Hegel. Indeed, each of the faults that Adorno finds
in Kant’s notion of freedom are, in effect, taken to their extreme by Hegel, or so I will argue.}

Then I will show how Adorno reconstructs the idea of freedom in
connection with nonidentity, arguing that freedom must be understood as a critical
response to specific situations of suffering caused by non- or misrecognition, a notion
that Adorno terms the “new categorical imperative”.

In order better to understand the negative dialectical reconstruction of freedom
that Adorno offers, it would be helpful briefly to consider the doctrine of “intelligible
freedom” in Kant, a notion that Adorno strongly criticizes. For Kant, human freedom
emerges from the encounter with the moral law that is intrinsic to subjectivity.\footnote{See Immanuel Kant, “Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals,” in \textit{The Basic Writings of

We can distinguish moral acts from merely prudential acts (the latter of which are governed by
“hypothetical imperatives”), Kant argues, by subjecting them to the test of reason. If a
certain act cannot be willed \textit{universally} without contradiction—if, for instance, I cannot...
say that everyone ought to occasionally break their promises—then that act violates the “categorical imperative,” which acts as the litmus test for morality. In Kant’s view, we can infer human freedom from the existence of the moral law, understood as the categorical imperative. It would be inconceivable, for Kant, that a moral law could prescribe courses of action for the human subject without that individual also being capable of freely undertaking those actions: “ought” implies “can”. But it is only in the face of the moral law, which gives force to the statement that the subject “ought” to act in a certain way, that we can deduce the “can,” and thus the possibility of freedom. This leads Kant to conclude that freedom is only possible through conformity with rational, moral law. Since moral law is that which founds human freedom, free actions are always already bound by the rational law that precedes them and conditions them. Hegel, though objecting to the overly formalistic character of Kant’s moral law, accepts the idea of freedom as the acceptance of a prior rational law, as we saw in the first chapter. What distinguishes Hegel from Kant in this respect is that Hegel attempts to concretize this law in the form of Sittlichkeit, the objectivity of ethical life that is realized in the State. In Hegel’s political society, individuals come to understand their own freedom not by intuiting the moral law that lies within them, but by recognizing their essential, moral selves through the mediation of the rational laws of the State.

Adorno largely agrees with Hegel’s criticism of Kant, arguing that by purifying the will of an empirical object, Kant illegitimately equates the will with ideal reason: “[The will] must have been deobjectified before it can become that absolutely sovereign reason which is to have the capacity to work irrespective of experience, and irrespective
of the leap between action and deed.” On the contrary, for Adorno, in order for the will actively to *will* anything, it must first have contact with a specific empirical situation that demands the subject’s action. Through the purification procedure that is intrinsic to Kant’s separation of categorical imperative from hypothetical imperatives, however, this contingent, nonidentical element of empirical reality necessary for real action vanishes. Despite Adorno’s apparent agreement with Hegel here, one may notice that this criticism is quite similar to the concerns I raised about Hegel in the first chapter. How, I wondered, does Hegel move from the bondsman, who in his finitude must work upon the objects in his particular, material situation, to an ideal freedom purified of all that is Other?

Whereas Kant simply excludes the empirical *a priori* in his consideration of freedom, Hegel attempts to integrate it into his concept of rational law. Yet—and this is Adorno’s first objection to Hegelian freedom—in attempting to give concrete substance to moral conscience, Hegel sides with the universal over the particular: “Immediately, then, the particular would be the universal, because it can find no definition of particularity except by way of the universal only; without the universal, Hegel concludes…the particular is nothing.” The substantiality of the individual moral conscience, where Kant locates freedom, lies in conformity with the universal that has been purged of all that is actually *particular*. Particularity in Hegel’s analysis, rather than referring to concrete existents, refers only to the concept of particularity *sui generis*.

126 Ibid, 236
127 This statement must be clarified. It is not that Kant fails to consider empirical situations or applications of the categorical imperative; indeed, Kant attempts to work out what the law of reason has to say with respect to examples as diverse as breaking a promise to the instance of a gambler who feels guilty because of his unsustainable financial practices. What militates against the particular in Kant’s analysis is not his attempt to apply the universal moral law to specific situations, but the way that the moral law is framed from the outset. In order for an action to be truly moral, it must be undertaken with the sole motivation of being moral. That is, moral action must be cleansed of any residue of particular commitments in the empirical world, for these would be contaminated by hypothetical imperatives.
128 Ibid, 327
Hegel does not pay attention to particular situations and objects as such, but lumps them together in a universal concept of “particularity.” In this way, Hegel reifies rationality in connection with the free will even more than Kant. Freedom becomes not simply an ideal accession to rational law, but concrete subordination to the socio-political manifestation of that law, within which the individual is subsumed without protest. In clinging to an ideal rationality detached from the empirical, rational law becomes irrational.

The hypostatization of rationality in the transcendental consciousness corresponds to the repression of irrational impulses by the moral law: the categorical imperative, as an expression of pure practical reason, must be cleansed of the hypothetical. Adorno’s second objection to Kantian and Hegelian freedom is that this separation of moral reason from empirical reality, or the idea of the moral law as *Faktum* in Kant, not only inhibits the free action of the individual, but also obscures the source of the moral law itself: “Obscurantism entwines with the cult of absolutely ruling reason. The constraint that issues from the Categorical Imperative…contradicts the freedom said to coalesce in it.”\(^{129}\) The moral law binds the will without the will being able to reflect upon its rational origins: such reflection would repeat the Third Antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where rational reflection upon an uncaused cause is proclaimed impossible.

It is again Hegel who, in attempting to bridge this antinomy in the concept of *Sittlichkeit*, takes this error even further. Hegel’s description of history as the march of the universal not only binds the individual subject to a rationality divorced from empirical reality, but also attempts to justify irrational events within history: “the absolute hypostatization of this objective logic of things as opposed to the sensuous

\(^{129}\) Ibid, 261
actuality of the course of history as it is enacted by individual human beings, becomes in Hegel…a way of justifying and finding excuses for things that are absolutely irrational.”¹³⁰ This “second nature” imbued upon humanity by historical progress appears irrational, divorced from any historical origin, like Kant’s moral law:

> The more relentlessly the process of socialization spins its web around every aspect of immediate human and interpersonal relations, the more impossible it becomes to recollect the historical origins of that process and the more irresistible the external semblance of something natural.¹³¹

The forms of human behavior that developed historically appear, in a reversal, to be natural since reflection upon their origin becomes difficult or impossible—an example could be self-interested, profit-maximizing behavior, commonly extolled as “human nature” in American culture. This lack of reflection is practically enforced in a Hegelian idea of history which treats the creation of new historical forms as moments in the rational unfolding of Geist. Indeed, this process is supposed to be the embodiment or substantiality of freedom by which mutual recognition between free subjects becomes actualized in concrete life. In order to attain this, however, subjects must act in accordance with the flow of history, the expression of Spirit, and cannot do otherwise: “There is not even the possibility [in Hegel] of something outside it becoming visible, something that is not caught up in the general inclusiveness.”¹³² The universal thus negates freedom as well as its own goals—rational self-understanding—by appearing as an irrational force that removes the element of spontaneity from freedom.

The crux of Adorno’s criticism of Hegelian freedom is thus that, by resting upon a genus/species difference between universal and particular, Hegel negates individual

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¹³⁰ Ibid, 113
¹³¹ Ibid, 121
¹³² Ibid
freedom on two fronts. First, by subsuming freedom under the concept of rational law, Hegel divorces that freedom from actualization in empirical reality. Second, when the subject acts in a social or political sphere, his or her actions are reduced to obedience to existing laws and social arrangements and are thereby cleansed of spontaneity. This results from Hegel’s association of freedom with a total conceptual horizon within which the acts of subjects, and subjects themselves, must be recognized. In the case of Taylor’s account of agency, the same consequences result from the equation of individuals’ “authentic” identities with generic background frameworks against which their morally significant actions are comprehended. Unfreedom binds itself inextricably to a type of mutual recognition that recognizes the Self and the Other as extensions of a universal genus, be it Geist or abstract moral goods. More deeply, however, the hypostatization of individual and universal in Hegelian freedom replicates the structure of domination in bourgeois society: “In [bourgeois] ideology we find cheek by jowl the demand for a rugged individualism…and on the other hand the insistence on adjustment, in other words, on the conforming individual.”\cite{133} The individual becomes merely the means to the realization of the aims of an integrated order of instrumental rationality, and the universal becomes the impersonal march of totalized exchange society from which the individual remains alienated. One and the same movement denies the freedom of the subject and the difference of the Other.

A fused horizon of recognition that would unify the “I” and the “We” would, for Adorno, deny freedom by forcing individuals to submit to impersonal and arbitrary authority. In the case of Taylor, the argument plays out similarly: by chaining authentic, individual identity to background frameworks that the subject always already “discovers”

\cite{133} History and Freedom, 212
himself or herself within, agency is reduced to uncritical acceptance of a generic moral
good. Adorno’s objection to Kantian freedom, and by extension Hegelian theories of
recognition, points to the importance of preserving nonidentity in a conception of
freedom. A theory of freedom that ideistically ignores the dialectical tension between
the subject and the specific empirical situation in which his or her free actions play out
would miss the real meaning of freedom in the same way that generic conceptuality
misses the nonidentity of the object.

In contradistinction, Adorno proposes to capture the relation between free
subjectivity and empirical reality through the concept of mimesis. It will be recalled from
previous sections of this chapter that for Adorno, mimesis consists of a prerational form
of cognition that seeks to assimilate itself to a specific Other. Mimesis is thus associated
with a time when the division between self and nature was not so clear cut, when, through
ritual and magic, individuals and societies adapted to specific aspects of external reality.
The journey of Odysseus was seen as the prototypical moment in which the rational
subject struggled to differentiate himself from both nature and the mythic residue of
mimesis. Mimesis was invoked to show the irreducible materiality and specificity of
either the epistemological object or the human person, the ontic remnant that can never
be fully incorporated into the concept. Just as recognition was seen to be a give and take
between conceptualization and the mimetic relation that perpetually subtends those
concepts, freedom for Adorno is the dialectical give and take of rational action and
mimesis. On the one hand, the subject—like Odysseus or Hegel’s man of self-certainty—
struggles to differentiate himself from empirical reality in order to establish himself as an
independent individuality: the struggle with nature founds the unity of the will. On the
other hand, as we saw in the lord/bondsman dialectic, it is impossible to cleanse this independence of its relation to the object; the subject can never entirely break with empirical reality:

We might say that the monadological principle is itself the product of a quite primitive, primary experience of things that stand opposed to our own subjectivity. This means that subject would be object in the very precise sense that the solidity and persistence of the subject is a mimesis of the very things that are not intrinsic to the subject. Perhaps because they elude us, these things acquire the hardness and solidity that we, as firm characters, and perhaps even as the embodiments of will power, set out to master.\footnote{Ibid, 193}

Before establishing itself as independent, the subject must engage in a mimetic relationship with external reality. It must assimilate itself to the concrete situation in which its free actions must play out, comprehending it in its specificity, before it can act freely. Thus, “[w]hat is decisive in the ego, its independence and autonomy, can be judged only in relation to its otherness, to the nonego.”\footnote{Negative Dialectics, 223. I will interpret “ego” here to mean essentially the same thing as the term “subject”. Thus, for Adorno, both of these terms refer to conscious reason’s struggle to separate itself from external reality and posit its independent unity.}

Adorno’s term for the “nonego” that grounds mimesis is the “addendum” [\textit{das Hinzutretende}]. Adorno understands the addendum as a somatic impulse transmitted to the subject from the empirical situation that compels it to act. The famous example of Buridan’s ass, which Adorno addresses directly, demonstrates what Adorno means by the “addendum.” Buridan’s ass, who is caught between two equidistant and equally appealing haystacks, is incapable of choosing which haystack to consume without an external impulse that directs him toward one or the other. For Adorno, the addendum is a bodily, affective investment in a concrete situation that opens up the possibility of action. Without, for instance, an experience of extreme disquietude at hearing another person scream I would not be moved to intervene to prevent a robbery. Impulse is thus an
affective component of the will which “jolts” the subject toward the decision to act and gives context and efficacy to free acts in the empirical world. It is that which prompts rational deliberation and the possibility of making a free decision. For Adorno, spontaneity, the will to act in a determinate way in this specific situation that is presented to the subject, must be explained by the uncertain, even contingent connection with material reality: “Contemplative conduct, the subjective correlate of logic, is the conduct that wills nothing. Conversely, each act of the will breaks through the mechanical autarky of logic…if the hand no longer twitched, there would be no will.”¹³⁶ That is, without a certain spontaneous, somatic investment in the empirical world, we would never break free from mere contemplation or rational reflection. The addendum, or the mimetic impulse that compels the subject to assimilate itself to a specific situation, disrupts the unity of the subject, its being-at-home with itself in conceptuality: “It is the force that enables consciousness to leave its own domain and so to change what merely exists; its recoil is resistance.”¹³⁷

This mimetic moment, however, becomes increasingly strained and rare in a society characterized by total rationality: “In a radically administered world…in a world which…really had fallen under the thumb of the universal, undialectically and exclusively, the will would lose all its power.”¹³⁸ As we saw at the beginning of this section, the totalizing procedures of bourgeois society drive a wedge between the individual and his or her empirical reality: the individual experiences him or herself as an isolated consciousness, alienated from the external world. It follows from the account of the addendum that, in such a situation, free action becomes impossible. In a totally

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¹³⁶ *Negative Dialectics*, 230
¹³⁷ Ibid, 241
¹³⁸ *History and Freedom*, 235
rationalized society, the subject would remain entirely within the dwelling of his or her own concepts, unable spontaneously to reach out to the external world through the somatic demand of the addendum. The mimetic jolt of the addendum is only possible through a confrontation with the elements of an empirical situation that escape a closed, totalitarian horizon of recognition. Like the characters of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, who live out their contentless lives in an empty situation with an equally empty horizon of expectations, the bourgeois subject remains trapped in an ideal rationality, unable to reach out through concrete action:

> For the fact is that this reality whose meaning has been sucked out of it and has become wholly concentrated in the human subject itself no longer provides the basis for an intervention, and, indeed, has become so radically alien and opposed to the human subject that the latter prevaricates while attempting the simplest task and finds himself unable to cope.¹³⁹

If freedom is only possible through a mimetic impulse that escapes societal rationalization, then the possibilities for freedom must be understood as negative and critical. Freedom begins with a somatic and affective response to a specific situation that cannot be encompassed by general horizons of recognition. It is here that the mimetic relation to the Other becomes crucially important. By undergoing a process of mimesis and assimilating ourselves to an Other who is misrecognized by total horizons of recognition, we also encounter the specific aspects of our shared, concrete situation that escape those horizons. By unveiling and criticizing the way that unified horizons of recognition necessarily misrecognize certain individuals and social structures, we also come to understand the concrete possibilities for our own freedom within the interstices of bourgeois society. Freedom is itself mimetic affinity with the marginalized Other:

> “Freedom turns concrete in the changing forms of repression, as resistance to

¹³⁹ Ibid, 233
repression.” Responding to a form of preconceptual affinity with the Other, one that engages with the Other’s singularity rather than reducing him or her to a generic horizon of recognition, the subject feels less isolated within total society. The acknowledgement of nonidentity through the addendum reconnects the subject to the fullness of empirical reality.

The task of political freedom is therefore to seek out the concrete possibilities within bourgeois society that provoke resistance to the totality. Returning to Kant, Adorno contends that we must respond to these possibilities through a “new categorical imperative”: “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself.” By thus invoking the categorical imperative, we can see that Adorno’s notion of freedom has turned Kant on his head. For Kant, the encounter with the moral law of the categorical imperative, understood as universal rationality, disclosed the possibility of freedom to the subject. For Adorno, in a parallel but opposite fashion, it is the need to criticize universal horizons of recognition, disclosed to us by the identity of total rationality and total irrationality at Auschwitz, that reveals the possibility of freedom. By responding to the categorical imperative of preventing another Auschwitz, we also come to understand our own free possibilities by opening up spaces for particular identity within a rationalized society. For Adorno, it is therefore by responding to specific situations of misrecognition, in which the particular is mutilated by the universal, that we are free.

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140 Negative Dialectics, 265
141 Ibid, 365
These possibilities, however, are only founded upon the breakdown in unified horizons of recognition, not their realization. Mimetic freedom, in connecting with a specific, misrecognized Other, cuts through the conventional modes of conceptual recognition and refuses to reduce that Other to a generic background framework. Adorno’s concept of freedom is thus a mode of being-against, a way of resisting the apparently inevitability of the march of history. It is important to stress, however, that this process is ongoing. As we saw in the first section of this chapter, we cannot settle for a negative theology that eschews conceptualization. Similarly, for Adorno, freedom is not simply an unplanned, impulsive reaction to misrecognition, but is rather dialectically bound up with rationality. Freedom is articulated in the continual give and take between forms of recognition and the mimesis that both grounds and dissolves them. Unlike in theories of recognition, freedom must not be conceived straightforwardly as acceptance or self-discovery; there can never be a fused horizon of recognition in which we can discover everyone’s particular identity. Rather, freedom must include an element of active resistance, of the possibility of acting differently and criticizing established horizons of recognition: “Hence I would say that the critical yardstick that allows reason…to oppose the superior strength of the course of the world is always the fact that in every situation there is a concrete possibility of doing things differently.”142

142 Ibid, 68
Conclusion: Recognition Reconstructed

In the foregoing critique, I have attempted to show that the theories of mutual recognition articulated by Hegel and Taylor are instruments too blunt to accomplish their intended purpose: to reconcile particular differences, cultural or otherwise, with a universal moral framework. By overemphasizing the importance of shared social and moral horizons to human agency, these theories tend to treat freedom as a straightforward process of accepting the broader cultural frameworks in which the subject is situated. In doing so, they make two serious errors in understanding the connections between freedom and recognition. First, their focus on general, shared backgrounds as bases for recognition of another person or another culture risks misrecognizing the ways that cultures often defy characterization as unified wholes and the ways that individuals within those cultures struggle to differentiate themselves from those shared backgrounds. Second, this overemphasis on shared horizons also fails to grasp how processes of contestation and critique of those horizons are also essential to human freedom, alongside the feeling of belonging within a cultural, political, or social community. However, these two aspects of human freedom—contestation and belonging—can never be fully united.

If these criticisms are correct, what remains valuable in theories of mutual recognition? Must such theories consequently capitulate to their dual opponents, the neutralist approach of procedural liberalism or the radical skepticism of postmodernism? My intention has not been to conduct a total critique of mutual recognition in favor of some wholesale embrace of misrecognition and misunderstanding in the face of the inadequacies of human cognition. Rather, I believe that the challenge posed by mutual recognition to atomistic, methodological individualism is still immensely important.
What should thus be preserved in these theories is their concept of the dialogical constitution of the subject, or the importance of interaction and interlocution with significant others in articulating one’s identity and agency. It is this model of subjectivity that, I have argued, actually speaks against some of the more metaphysical conceits of theories of mutual recognition. The purpose of my critique, consequently, has been to show what problems remain unresolved in such theories in order to produce a more viable and less potentially repressive version of recognition. I have referred to this version of recognition in the last chapter of the thesis as “mimetic recognition,” or attentiveness to the particular features of another culture or individual as distinct from and often antagonistic to the general horizons under which we might categorize that culture or person. Now that I have articulated this emendation to theories of mutual recognition, I would like to hazard three suggestions for further research in recognitive theories of freedom. These suggestions are not taken directly from Adorno, but are rather extrapolated on the basis of what I think his theory of nonidentity can contribute to debates surrounding mutual recognition.

1. With respect to intercultural recognition, we should understand broad cultural or moral backgrounds as tenuously coherent frameworks that are internally fractured and differentiated. When dealing with individuals within a culture, recognition should be sensitive to the persistence of antagonism and contestation among the different possible interpretations of significant life goods, moral or otherwise. Correspondingly, when dealing another cultural good itself, theories of recognition should be wary of treating that good as a coherent whole that can be “recognized” or interpreted in a single, straightforward manner. Because cultural
meaning is more often than not fragile and contested, we should acknowledge that our understanding of another cultural good entails a certain misrecognition or abstraction. Recognition would then be oriented more toward critiquing that misrecognition, or calling attention to the ways in which generic moral or cultural horizons often violently override the struggles of particular individuals within those horizons. This process of critique would be continual, and it would rest on the acknowledgment that broader horizons can never be entirely commensurable with the particular identities that they subsume.

2. Theories of mutual recognition such as Taylor’s risk treating freedom as a rather uncomplicated process of accepting abstract cultural or moral good and the way that it is expressed in political arrangements. If, as Adorno points out, such an abstract horizon fails to encompass concrete, particular identities without misrecognizing them, then it cannot form an adequate foundation for the freedom of those particular individuals. At best, such theories would simply give a truncated account of what grounds a certain individual’s meaningful agency. At worst, they risk complicity with an integrative bourgeois society that tends to homogenize its members under the exchange principle. In either event, the abstractness of the horizons of recognition upon which Hegel and Taylor rely suggests that freedom must also be a process of criticizing and contesting these horizons. While it is necessary to preserve the insight that individual identity and agency is constituted in an intersubjective, dialogic milieu—an insight that Adorno acknowledges in his dialectical presentation of freedom—individuals within such an environment often articulate their freedom less by accepting it and
more by differentiating themselves from it. If the moral or cultural horizons that provide meaning to individual lives in modern society are too abstract or generic, then freedom must be understood as a protest against that abstraction in favor of greater differentiation.

3. Finally, theories of mutual recognition would do well to understand the genus/species model of difference, which tends to treat particular differences as stable segments of a broader genus, in a more complicated and destabilized fashion. Difference, I have argued, is restless within the genera within which it is situated, and the struggles undertaken by particular identities continually reshape such genera. But destabilizing the genus/species model of difference in thinking about political recognition implies deeper questions concerning the nature of Western metaphysical reason. At the risk of making an exaggerated generalization, I would say that what must be examined and critiqued is less the genus/species model of difference itself, and more the type of rationality that lies at its root: the tendency of Western thought to reduce the Other to the Same, difference to harmony and unity. It is simply a presupposition of Hegel’s account of freedom that what the subject desires is self-certainty, or freedom from otherness. A genus/species understanding of difference, which chains particular differences to sameness in the genus, follows from a form of metaphysical reason that will not abide by an Other that cannot be conquered by the sovereignty of the concept. My critique of mutual recognition via Adorno thus points to the need for a deeper critique of the habits of Western metaphysical reason, specifically with respect to the concept of freedom as self-sufficiency or purification of otherness.
By incorporating these suggestions, theories of mutual recognition can perhaps finally become what they were originally intended to be: political theories more hospitable to cultural otherness than the rigid neutrality of proceduralist liberalism. A reconstructed recognition would treasure the critical moment of mimetic freedom stemming from the encounter with a specific Other, one who breaks through the comfort of our conceptual dwelling and permits us to envision new avenues for free action. At the heart of this reconstruction lies the intuition that the same conceptual framework that misrecognizes the difference of the Other also mutilates the freedom of the individual. Respecting the mimetic moment of recognition perhaps finally illuminates the way that theories of mutual recognition can go about achieving their original purpose: showing that respect for otherness and the realization of our own freedom are, at root, one and the same ideal.
Bibliography


