

Hegel's Theory of Recognition and Its Influence on Contemporary French Philosophy

Yiwei Luo

*Faculty of Letters (School of Literature), The University of Osaka, Osaka, Japan
2529390961@qq.com*

Abstract. This paper centers on Hegel's theory of recognition, tracing its philosophical background and internal logic. It argues that Hegel's theory aims to overcome the predicament of the "closed subject" that emerged from Cartesian philosophy. From Descartes' cogito to Kant's transcendental forms and Fichte's absolute ego, the tradition of subject-centered philosophy has progressively enclosed itself within the loop of subjectivity. In response to this trajectory, Hegel proposes that the realization of subjectivity is achieved through the process of "recognition," thereby opening a new path for subject philosophy. This paper provides a detailed analysis of the structure of "desire–struggle–recognition" in Hegel's theory, with a special focus on the dialectic of master and slave as a historical process in the formation of subjectivity. Through life-and-death struggle and labor, self-consciousness not only gains recognition from the other but also dialectically transitions from particularity to universality. This structure profoundly influenced twentieth-century French philosophy—particularly through Alexandre Kojève and Jean-Paul Sartre—culminating in Emmanuel Levinas's ethical critique.

Keywords: Hegel, recognition, subjectivity, French philosophy

1. Introduction

With the formulation of the proposition cogito ergo sum by Descartes, Western philosophy happened a decisive change which is called as epistemological turn and the philosophy of the subject. The influence of this epistemological turn extended well beyond Descartes' own system, profoundly shaping generations of philosophers and establishing a new trajectory for Western thought. Unlike ancient Greek philosophy, which focused primarily on the objective world itself, modern philosophy—under the impact of Descartes' cogito—turned increasingly to problems such as the relationship between the self and the external world, subjectivity and objectivity, universality and particularity, transcendence and immanence [1].

As the originator of this trend, Descartes not only reoriented philosophical thought but also laid the unshakable foundation for the philosophy of the subject with his cogito [2]. This reflective, self-grounding "I think(cogito)" asserts a trend, that all objectivity is essentially internal to subjectivity. In the Kantian period, this trend evolved into the so-called Copernican revolution, in which the human subject became the condition of possibility for experience. Because the structure of subjectivity

determines the shape of all experience, Kant concluded that knowledge is necessarily mediated by the subject [3]. In this sense, subjective philosophy became the foundation of all knowledge.

This subject-oriented trajectory culminated in Fichte's philosophy. Fichte argues that all knowledge shares a common form and is therefore subordinated to the science of knowledge (*Wissenschaftslehre*), which is itself grounded in the ego [4]. By positing the self as the absolute origin of all knowledge, Fichte completes the system of subject philosophy. However, this very development leads to an inherent aporia: a world grounded entirely in the subject ultimately cannot escape the limitations of subjectivity [5]. Hegel seeks to resolve this impasse by fundamentally transcending the framework of subject-centered thought. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he famously transitions from consciousness to self-consciousness. For Hegel, the Cartesian "atomistic" conception of the self must be overcome in a double sense: the idea of the subjectivity as the absolute origin leads to a closed loop of reflection. In Hegel's view, the atomistic ego is not the end point of philosophical development, but merely a moment in the unfolding of spirit. The ethical limitations of subject philosophy stem not only from its formalism but also from its ontological assumptions, which preclude objectiveness of moral validity. A purely subjective standpoint can never attain universality.

To reach a universal self-consciousness, subjectivity must encounter the Other. In the ensuing struggle, it discovers that even the destruction of the Other is but an amplification of its own subjectivity. Only through recognition consciousness can transcend particularity and realize itself as universal. Hegel for the first time systematically formulated his theory of recognition. As one of the most essential components of his practical philosophy, the recognition theory presented through the master–slave dialectic stands as a key point of Hegel's system. "Recognition is the best-known theme, and certainly the core, of Hegel's political philosophy. It is no wonder, therefore, that discussions in social and political theory have often centred on the 'struggle for recognition', most famously exemplified in the 'life-and-death struggle' that leads to the relation of master and slave in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*." [6] Hegel approached the question of self-consciousness, which had dominated philosophy since Descartes, in a highly original way. He treated the self not as an unconditional or self-enclosed entity but rather as something fundamentally dependent on the process of mutual recognition.

2. Hegel's theory of recognition

2.1. Self-consciousness and the dialectic of desire

In *Phenomenology*, Hegel was responding to the prevailing model of subjectivity, epitomized by Fichte's conception of the ego as a static, atomistic entity. Following Kant's transcendental framework, Fichte held that the subject's a priori forms govern all experiential content. However, this leads to a subjectivity locked within its own formal emptiness. In Fichte's system, although he too acknowledged the centrality of desire in self-consciousness, the transcendental ego remained fixed and so immune to empirical transformation that it can not be changed. As such, Fichte's account of reconciliation was ultimately incomplete—a compromise rather than a dialectical resolution [7].

Hegel, by contrast, insists—just like Fichte—that self-consciousness is essentially desire: "Self-consciousness is, to begin with, desire in general." [8] That is, in its initial stage, self-consciousness seeks to overcome the non-self, to assimilate the external world and thus affirm its own being. This desire, however, soon transcends the realm of sensuous gratification and begins to seek confirmation from another independent self-consciousness—that is, recognition from the Other, which is a

counterpart of equal standing and similar nature to myself. At this point, two self-conscious beings, each seeking the same recognition while refusing to acknowledge the other's autonomous existence, inevitably enter into a life-and-death struggle. As Hegel writes: "This struggle is a life-and-death struggle." [8] Each self-consciousness seeks to preserve itself by negating the other, but in doing so, one side ultimately submits in order to preserve its biological existence, becoming the slave. The victor, who becomes the master, secures the privilege of projecting his selfhood onto the slave.

Yet paradoxically, it is through the coerced labor of the slave that genuine subjectivity begins to emerge. In transforming the world through practical activity, the slave gradually constructs his own sense of self. As Hegel remarks, "The labour of the slave brings about the true independence." [8] In this process, the slave transcends the illusion that everything external is alien and begins to grasp universality through engagement with reality. In turn, the master must eventually recognize the slave as an independent subject in order to attain true universality. Hegel treats recognition as the pivotal moment in the development of self-consciousness. It marks the historical and ontological shift from a closed, self-sufficient subject to an open, relational self. This theoretical gesture responds not only to ethical concerns but also to fundamental ontological and epistemological questions [8]. Self-consciousness begins as desire, and this desire ultimately aims at recognition by the Other [8]. The inner certainty of the self is insufficient; only by being acknowledged as a self-consciousness by another can one attain universality and objectivity. Thus, recognition is not merely an ethical interaction but an ontological necessity. The completion of the self requires the mediation of the Other—not as an external condition, but as an internal constitutive mechanism of subjectivity itself. The master–slave dialectic serves as a concrete exposition of this logic: through negation, domination, and ultimately mutual recognition, the self transitions from particular to universal self-consciousness [8].

In conclusion, Hegel's theory of recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is of crucial significance. It not only addresses the internal crisis of subject-centered philosophy but also constitutes a turning point in the development of Hegel's dialectics. The "self" is no longer conceived as an isolated, a priori form, but as a historically generated and relationally realized concrete being. Recognition, as the bridge to universality and concreteness, ultimately defines the true content of Hegel's concept of Spirit.

2.2. The master–slave dialectic

As Hegel famously writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Self-consciousness is, to begin with, desire in general" [8]. Yet this desire differs from the mere appetitive satisfaction of animals; it points, intrinsically, toward a deeper form of affirmation—a "desire to be recognized" by another self-conscious being. In this light, the structure of self-consciousness is not one of isolated affirmation but rather a dialectical process, driven by the necessity of recognition.

This leads directly to the highly historical and dynamic structure of the master–slave dialectic. Hegel conceives a scene in which two self-consciousnesses encounter one another, each seeking recognition from the other while refusing to recognize the other's autonomy. This impasse inevitably results in a life-and-death struggle. The aim of the struggle is not merely physical domination but rather the establishment of spiritual precedence. Ultimately, one party, confronted with the threat of death, submits in order to preserve its life and becomes the slave, while the victor assumes the position of the master. On the surface, the master appears to gain both recognition and power. However, this relationship soon undergoes an internal reversal. Because the slave is not a free subject, the master's recognition from the slave lacks independent validity. As such, only with this recognition, the master's sense of self still remains hollow and unfulfilled. Paradoxically, it is the

slave, through labor and practical engagement with the material world, who begins to forge an authentic subjectivity. As Hegel writes, "The labour of the slave brings about the true independence" [8]. By mediating itself through the transformation of the natural world, the slave comes to recognize its own creative power and thus begins to grasp itself not as a passive object but as a universal subject.

In this historical unfolding, the master–slave dialectic marks not only a turning point in Hegel's personal philosophical development, but also a structural innovation in the entire tradition of Western thought. For the first time, it becomes clear that subjectivity is not an original, self-enclosed substance but something that is generated dialectically—through struggle, recognition, and labor, in relation to the Other. This theoretical reorientation radically undermines the Cartesian model of the isolated ego as the starting point of knowledge and ethics. This insight has had enduring consequences for subsequent traditions, including phenomenology, existentialism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory. It underwrites the fundamental premise that: "The subject is not a primary entity, but a historically produced structure." [8] Therefore, the master–slave dialectic not only surpasses the limitations of classical subject philosophy but also redefines the core relationships between self and other, freedom and dependence, existence and consciousness. It stands as one of the decisive turning points in modern philosophy.

3. The theory of recognition and contemporary french philosophy

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Hegel's theory of recognition has exerted a profound influence on French philosophy [9]. In the twentieth century especially, French philosophers began to re-examine the structural tensions embedded within the master–slave dialectic and came to regard it as a vital resource for rethinking subjectivity, the relation to the Other, and social existence as such. One of the major currents in twentieth-century French philosophy is precisely the attempt to overcome the subject-centered rationality of the Enlightenment by going beyond Hegel's logic of recognition [10].

Kojève emphasized recognition as a historical process through which subjectivity is constituted and interpreted the life-and-death struggle as the driving force of history. His interpretation left a lasting impact on Sartre, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty, all of whom developed their own understandings of subjectivity in dialogue with Hegel. Kojève's reading not only highlighted the dialectical relation between labor and history in Hegel, but also redefined recognition as a process of becoming-other (*se faire autre*), thus pushing French philosophy beyond the traditional limits of consciousness-centered frameworks [11]. Sartre inherited Hegel's concern with recognition but reworked it into the structure of "being-for-others." For Sartre, self-consciousness does not emerge in isolation but is fractured in the gaze of the Other. The look of the Other objectifies the self, revealing freedom as both exposed and evasive. This "desire and flight from recognition" becomes a modern re-enactment of Hegel's dialectic in the existential structure of subjectivity [12].

In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, this line of thought is radicalized into an ethical affirmation of the absolute primacy of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas criticizes, just like the recognition of Hegelianism, the Philosophy of same as inherently violent—an act of assimilation in which the Other is reduced to a moment in the development of the self. Levinas insists on a notion of the Other as fundamentally heterogeneous: "the Other as Other" cannot be absorbed into the same but must be respected in its irreducible alterity [13]. From Levinas's perspective, Hegel's recognition reveals the impossibility of a self-sufficient subject, but still seeks to incorporate the Other into a totalizing system of identity. It thereby neglects the transcendence of the Other. In response, Levinas proposes an "ethics of the face," in which the encounter with the Other's face

constitutes an unavoidable ethical demand. This demand is not born from the self's initiative but from its passive responsibility in the face of the Other's call [13].

Through this reconceptualization, recognition is no longer understood as a symmetrical psychological interaction between individuals, but as a fundamentally ontological asymmetry and an irreducible ethical summons. From Kojève to Levinas, the French re-readings of Hegel's dialectic reframe recognition not as a means to self-realization but as an encounter with exteriority, heterogeneity, and obligation. This forms a trajectory that shifts from dialectic to difference, from the same to the Other.

4. Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, Alexandre Kojève's distinctive interpretation of Hegel's philosophy—particularly his reading of the master–slave dialectic—sparked a profound wave of interest in France. Kojève's ideas left an indelible mark on philosophers such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas, each of whom undertook critical appropriations of Hegel's dialectic in response to the intellectual upheavals accompanying the two world wars. Over the following decades, as structuralism began to reshape the French philosophical landscape, Hegel's master–slave dialectic, though still resonant, was increasingly subjected to critical pressure. For Hegel, the reason one necessarily seeks recognition from the Other is that the Other is understood as a being structurally analogous to oneself. That is, the Other is posited as "another me," and it is precisely this structural sameness that underlies the demand for recognition. While Hegel does not reject the Other, his theory tends to instrumentalize and simplify the Other, reducing it to a moment within the dialectical unfolding of the self, without granting it an independent ontological status [14].

Levinas, taking this as his point of departure, asserts that ethics precedes metaphysics, and that the Other, as an absolutely other being, must be regarded as the first philosophical principle. From Levinas's perspective, Hegel's recognition relation never truly penetrates the alterity of the Other. The reconciliation reached in the master–slave dialectic ultimately occurs within a higher-order universality. Levinas argues that this is a hallmark of Western metaphysics since modernity: a philosophy of the Same, in which difference is sublated into identity. Such a structure, he contends, is not a real relation to the Other, but rather a violent assimilation, an erasure of particularity in the name of dialectical synthesis. Hegel's dialectic, which unfolds through the triadic structure of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, ultimately leads the subject back to itself. In this framework, the Other becomes merely the antithesis—a function or moment within the development of the self. For Levinas, such a structure renders the Other non-other, and the theory of recognition becomes a unfolding in the instrumentalization of alterity [15].

As a critique of the philosophy of the subject, Levinas points out that the truly possible other-ego relationship is not one in which I recognize the other as a kind of me, which is merely an extension of the I-ness to the other, the base of which is still the ego. In a true other-ego relationship, the other is supposed to be an absolute transcendent being, an infinite being [15]. This Infinite One excludes from me the possibility of any intersubjectivity, but is rather an absolute transcendence of me that imposes on me the responsibility for the Other. Because of absolute transcendence, I can never fundamentally gain a full understanding of the other, but it is also because of this that I can carry the responsibility for the Other. For Levinas, the other's asymmetry toward me is not a form of violence, but rather makes ethics possible.

For it is only by reacting to my finitude in the midst of an infinite otherness that the egoism of my essence is unconditionally wrong in ethics [16]. This error is not a rational questioning but an absolute ethical verdict, the unconditional unethicity or guilt of egoism towards me already

declared on the page in the asymmetrical relation to the absolute Other. Through this shift, Levinas not only displaces recognition from the axis of symmetry and mutuality, but also radicalizes it into an infinite and irreversible ethical relation.

References

- [1] Copleston, Frederick. (2022). *Rationalism: From Descartes to Leibniz*. translated by Chen Yan, Jiuzhou Publishing House.
- [2] Descartes, René. (2014). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. translated by Pang Jingren, The Commercial Press.
- [3] Kant, Immanuel. (2004). *Critique of Pure Reason*. translated by Deng Xiaomang and Yang Zutao, People's Publishing House.
- [4] Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. (2014). *Collected Works of the Fichte System: Volume I*. translated by Liang Zhixue, The Commercial Press.
- [5] Hegel, G. W. F. (2013). *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: Volume IV*. translated by He Lin, Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [6] Sembou, Evangelia. (2003). Hegel's Idea of a 'Struggle for Recognition': The Phenomenology of Spirit. *History of Political Thought*, 24(2), 262–281.
- [7] Wood, Allen W. (1990). *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Hegel, G. W. F. (2013). *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. translated by He Lin and Wang Jiuxing, Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [9] Xia, Ying. (2010). The Hegelian Ghost in Contemporary French Philosophy. *Academic Monthly*, 42(9), 58-64.
- [10] Yang, Dachun. (2021). *Language, Body, and the Other: Three Major Themes in Contemporary French Philosophy*. Beijing Normal University Press.
- [11] Liu, Huaiyu. (2018). The Vital Source of Existentialist Marxism: French Hegelianism and the 'Rediscovery' of Young Marx. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 44(2), 5–14.
- [12] Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1999). *Being and Nothingness*. translated by Wei Wenxiang, The Commercial Press.
- [13] Levinas, Emmanuel. (2009). *Totality and Infinity*. translated by Wang Qingjie, China Social Sciences Press.
- [14] Sun, Xiaoling. (2009). *From the Absolute Ego to the Absolute Other: The Problem of Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Husserl and Levinas*. Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- [15] Leng, Xin. (2023). Transcendence and the Other: On the Problem of Transcendence in the Early and Middle Thought of Levinas. *Journal of Tongji University (Social Science Edition)*, 34(5), 13-22.
- [16] Levinas, Emmanuel. (2019). *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. translated by Wu Xiaoming, Peking University Press.