

Much in the same vein of his development of consciousness beginning with sense-certainty, Hegel embarks upon a phenomenological investigation of self-consciousness by starting at what he recognizes as its most basic and fundamental property; desire.

The business of consciousness is to occupy itself with something else; the object of sense-certainty is something external to itself, like a tree, or a dog. Self-consciousness on the other hand, as the name implies, is concerned with itself – its proper object is itself. As such, self-consciousness fulfills both positions of being in-itself and for-itself; it is the subject that exists and extends its consciousness outwards, yet this same consciousness which extends outwards to understand its object is in the same instance reflected back into itself, because the object which is for-consciousness in the realm of self-consciousness is itself. Thus the object of self-consciousness is the self-same ‘I’ which cognizes.

Self-consciousness is opposed to consciousness in that the difference it posits between itself and otherness is collapsed into itself (167). What is truly ‘other’ then, for self-conscious, is another I. Another self-certain self-conscious subject/object which perceives itself as constituting the world about it, as constituting Life. The primary motive of self-consciousness then, according to Hegel, is to ‘enrich’ (173) its own I by superseding the other I’s it encounters – by denying their I-ness (174).

The enrichment of the I, or the satisfaction it derives from denying the existence of other I’s, occurs as such; the primary I (I will take myself as this first I) is certain that other I’s (you, my reader) do not exist – that you are nothingness. You are nothing more than something for me, for my I, I am the only true I, I am the certainty of life, and you are merely an object for me to consume or put to work, or be made an object for my entertainment, like some sad court jester. My I is the guarantor of objectiveness, and the world is for me. According to Hegel, this is the nature of desire.

Yet, and in the same mode of reasoning which revealed the incompatibility of consciousness with itself, Hegel argues that the motive of desire is inherently self-defeating. Insofar as consciousness is enriched by overcoming other I’s, it admits their presence, for without it there would be no fuel which fed the flames of desire. In the simplest of terms: I could not overcome you if you did not exist, and so by overcoming you (or attempting to) I grant reality to your existence. Thus the essence of desire no longer appears to be the enrichment of the I, but the acknowledgement of my I in the I’s of others; “*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*” (175).

Hegel’s account of the nature of desire depicts it as being a sort of will to assert one’s power. Desire is characterized by a craving to proclaim oneself as the objective guarantor of reality, of truth, and in doing so must deny the realities and truths of others. As I see it, there are two succinct ways to deal with and understand this notion of desire. The first being: desire, as Hegel portrays it, only captures desire in a very nascent stage, and that as self-consciousness develops so does the primary essence of desire with it, to reflect and capture a more sophisticated being who engages with the world not in terms of me vs. you, or a world of differences and contradictions, but as being immersed in a totality where distinctions between I’s dissolves. The second way to comprehend this notion is as such: Hegel has really gotten the essence of desire wrong. It is not a will to assert one’s power, but is in actuality a will to achieve a state of peace and tranquility – desire is equated to relaxation. Desire is not combative in nature, but peace-seeking, and it is only due to the harsh realities that self-consciousness is brought up in that this

combative desire grows – not to fulfill itself for its own sake, but as a means to achieve relaxation in the face of resistance.

These two understandings are not exclusive, and it could very well be that the maturation of desire finds itself moving from ego-centric to peace-seeking in nature. We must remain patient, and allow Hegel to finish his story, before we go off chasing the butterflies he has set free.