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Hegel on the Personhood of God

Stephen Houlgate

One of the most important achievements of Robert Williams' recent — and, sadly, last — book is to have demonstrated that, for Hegel, God and spirit cannot be understood without the concept of “personhood” (or “personality”) (*Persönlichkeit*). Personhood, Williams insists, is not dismissed by Hegel as a mere metaphor or “representation”, but is “essentially connected with and inseparable from his concept of Spirit” (RRW 191). Yet, Williams notes, there is no monograph on Hegel's theory of personhood (RRW 157). Williams' book thus provides the first detailed study of one of the central concepts of Hegel's philosophy.¹

Personhood and the Concept

In Hegel's view, Williams maintains, Spinoza's philosophy is “genuinely speculative” because it conceives of finitude “as relative to absolute substance and necessity” (RRW 202). Yet such substance, as Hegel's Spinoza conceives it, lacks any internal principle of negation and consequently is not freely self-negating, self-determining substance. In Williams' words, “absolute substance does not negate itself” and so “is not a movement that originates from itself and that returns to itself”. It is, rather, an “abstract, impersonal substance” — one that, in lacking “the infinite form of negation”, “lacks personhood, spirituality, and freedom” (RRW 203-04). For Hegel himself, by contrast, as he argues in the *Logic*, “the truth of substance is the concept”, and it is the concept that then makes personhood logically necessary (RRW 149, 201).

Hegel's speculative logic derives the fundamental categories of thought and being from the initially indeterminate category of pure being. In the process such logic discovers that being must take the form of quality, quantity and measure, and then of certain “essential” determinations, such as identity, difference and contradiction, as well as substance and causality. In the third part of the *Logic* — the doctrine of the concept — Hegel then argues that being must be concept, objectivity and finally “idea” or self-determining reason. The later categories do not simply replace the earlier ones but include them as their moments; so, for example, quality and quantity belong to the essential “existence” of things, and causality remains a feature of mechanical objects (*WL*, *GW* 11: 330; 12: 137 / *M* 488, 715).

Nonetheless, the logical structure of later categories differs significantly from that of earlier ones. The difference between the concept and substance is especially important.

Substance, as Hegel conceives it, is coextensive with the movement of its accidents, so this latter movement, in Hegel's words, is simply "the *actuality* of substance *as a tranquil coming forth of itself*". Substance thus unfolds itself in the movement of its accidents. On the other hand, however, substance is different from its accidents insofar as it is the "*absolute power*" over them. As such, it creates and destroys the accidents in which it unfolds itself (WL, GW 11: 394-95 / M 556). Substance is, therefore, an ambiguous form of being, since it both coincides with its accidents *and* has logical and causal priority over them. Note that Hegel's conception of substance differs from the conception he attributes to Spinoza, since the former is more dynamic and self-moving than the latter: Hegel describes substance, for example, as "self-positing", whereas he regards Spinozan substance as abstract and "unmoved" (*unbewegt*) (WL, GW 21: 148, 247; 11: 393 / M 161, 250, 554). Hegel's conception of substance also differs subtly from Spinoza's own conception, set out in the *Ethics*, since the former is related to its accidents, whereas the latter is related to its modes. Yet Spinozan substance exhibits the same ambiguity as its Hegelian counterpart: for Spinozan substance manifests itself in its modes, which are precisely modes *of* substance itself, but it is also the power over and *cause* of its modes, which are thus its effects and so dependent on it.² Substance, for both Spinoza and Hegel, is thus that to which its *own* determinations *point back* as their ultimate ground.³

The logical structure of the concept in Hegel's *Logic* differs from that of substance by coinciding completely with, and being identical with, its determinations. The concept itself is conceived by Hegel as "*absolute identity with itself*" or self-relation, and as such is what he calls the "*universal*" (WL, GW 12: 33 / M 601-2, trans. modified). However, it contains the moment of negation and so, unlike Spinozan substance (as Hegel understands it), differentiates itself into further determinations.⁴ Specifically, it differentiates itself into "the particular" and "the singular" (or "individual") (see WL, GW 12: 35 / M 603). Yet these determinations are not *caused* by the universal and so do not point back to it in the way that accidents or modes point back to substance as their ground. The particular and singular are simply further determinations *of* the universal itself: they are the particularised and singularised universal. The universal thus "*continues itself*" in the particular and singular, and indeed it proves to be genuinely universal precisely by continuing itself in this way (see WL, GW 12: 34 / M 602).

Hegel describes the universal as “*free power*”, but strictly speaking it is no longer a power over its determinations in the manner of substance (*WL, GW 12: 35 / M 603*). It does not, therefore, exercise causal necessity and subject its determinations to the latter. On the contrary, Hegel contends, the universal lets its determinations go free as distinct determinations with a character of their own.⁵ Yet, as just noted, the universal continues itself in those determinations and so relates to itself in them. It is to be understood, therefore, not just as power, but as what Hegel calls “*free love and limitless blessedness*, for it is a relating of itself to what is *different as to itself alone*” (*WL, GW 12: 35 / M 603*, trans. modified). The concept, as the self-differentiating universal, thus combines identity and difference into one movement: it continues itself in, and is identical with, determinations that are different from it. Its identity, indeed, consists in the process of giving itself different forms, in particularising and singularising itself.

The particular, Hegel maintains, consists in being determinate within itself but also with respect to what is other than it. It is, as he puts it, the “total reflection”: on the one hand, “reflection-into-other” and, on the other hand, “reflection-into-self” (*WL, GW 12: 35 / M 604*). If the universal as such is self-identical and self-relating, the particular is thus explicitly distinguished from what it is not: it is this, *not* that. The singular, by contrast, is once again *self-relating*, but it is a self-relating particular, a specific independent *this*. There is, therefore, a clear difference between the determinations of universality, particularity and singularity. One should be careful, however, not to treat them all simply as different *particular* or *singular* determinations: for they are different forms *of the universal*. The particular and singular are thus not just distinct or individual items, but they are themselves the particularised or singularised universal. So, as we read in the *Encyclopaedia*, there is no such thing as the “animal” as such, as a pure universal, but only particular, individual animals with a “universal nature”. The latter, however, is essential to the particular individuals, for without it they would cease being particular *animals*.

“Animal as such” cannot be pointed out; only a definite animal can ever be pointed at. “The animal” does not exist; on the contrary, this expression refers to the universal nature of single animals, and each existing animal is something that is much more concretely determinate, something particularised. But “to be animal”, the kind considered as the universal, pertains to the determinate animal

and constitutes its determinate essentiality. If we were to deprive a dog of its animality we could not say what it is (*Enz* § 24 Z 1).

Hegel insists, therefore, that the particular and singular remain inseparable from the universal from which they nonetheless differ. They are the universal itself *as* particular and singular. Indeed, Hegel claims, each determination in fact contains all three moments within it; that is to say, “every moment of the Concept is itself the whole Concept” (*Enz* § 163 A; see also RRW 237). This is not to deny that the singular can occur in its immediacy, separated from the moment of universality; this happens, Hegel claims, in the judgement in which a singular subject is distinguished from but also related to a universal predicate. As a moment of the concept, however, the singular is not isolated in this way, but is the universal *itself* that has come to be self-relating or for itself in its particularity. In other words, it is the universal or the concept itself as the explicitly self-relating totality of its moments, or “the Concept *posited* as totality” (*Enz* § 163 A; see RRW 207).

The name that Williams gives to singularity conceived in this way is “universal singularity” (RRW 222, 271, 274).⁶ Such singularity, to repeat the point, is not opposed to what is universal, but is the universal itself *as* a singular, self-relating unity. It is this universal singularity, Williams contends, that grounds the idea of personhood, though personhood itself belongs not to the concept as such but to the idea (see RRW 225, 269).

As Williams explains, the concept takes the further form of objectivity and in so doing “sublates itself into existence” (RRW 151). This does not mean that the concept lacks being in its own right. All the categories in speculative logic are forms of both being and thought, so the concept is already in itself a form of being: it is *being itself*, conceived not just as quality, quantity or substance, but as self-particularising and self-singularising universality.⁷ As such, however, being-as-concept cannot just remain that, but must take the form of mechanical, chemical and teleological objectivity. It thereby gives itself an “existence” beyond that of being mere concept.⁸ In so doing, however, the unity of the concept is lost insofar as the components of objectivity — different mechanical and chemical objects — have a (relatively) independent identity. This unity is then restored in the “idea”, in which the “objective” components are reduced to moments of such a unity. The idea initially takes the form of life, in which organs cohere into a single, self-relating unity, namely the living organism. It then becomes an explicit unity for itself in the form of “*self-knowing truth*” (*WL, GW* 12: 236 / M 824; see also RRW 225). This category brings speculative logic

to its conclusion. Logic ends, therefore, by showing being to be not just quality and quantity, not just the self-singularising universal, and not just life, but the absolute idea, or self-determining reason, *that knows itself to be such*. This self-knowledge is the “personhood” that belongs to the idea. Such personhood is thus not just a metaphor, but a necessary logical constituent of the idea, of true being. It is the self-knowledge through which the idea becomes a single, self-relating totality. As Williams writes, therefore, “the personhood of the absolute in the *Logic* constitutes the consummate singularity of the absolute idea” (RRW 216). It is not merely the concept, but the idea, as “universal singularity”.⁹

The preceding account of the logic of the concept is brief and sketchy, but it suffices to show, I hope, that Williams is right to emphasise the inseparability of the idea and personhood in Hegel’s *Logic*. Spinozan substance, of course, also achieves self-understanding and self-knowledge, but it differs significantly from the hegelian “idea”. Thought is one of the attributes of Spinozan substance, but thought as such is not yet self-knowledge; it is simply a distinctive way of being, or quality of being, that expresses substance in a different way from extension.¹⁰ Knowledge proper, or what Spinoza calls “intellect”, is more than the simple attribute of thought, since it has an object, namely substance itself and its modes, in a way that thought does not.¹¹ Thought is a distinctive way of being, but intellect is the knowing *of* the world — a knowing that thought itself makes necessary. Intellect, in other words, forms part of the modal system that substance, through its attributes, *causes* to exist. Infinite and finite intellect are thus derived from, and the effects of, substance, but they do not belong directly to substance itself.¹² In that sense, even though substance knows itself through its modes, it is not itself, qua substance, “*self-knowing truth*”. Spinozan substance is the ground and cause (as well as the object) of knowledge, including its own self-knowledge, but, unlike Hegel’s “idea”, it does not itself have subjectivity and personhood.¹³

Spinoza famously equates substance with God, and similarly Hegel equates the idea with God. More precisely, Hegel claims that religion represents or pictures as “God” what philosophy understands to be the logical idea.¹⁴ For Hegel, therefore, personhood belongs essentially to God; indeed, God is “authentic personhood itself” (RRW 306). As Williams goes on to note, however, such personhood retains an “abstractness that must be overcome in a further mediation”. This is due to the fact that the idea itself remains a logical structure and is not yet actual self-knowing self-consciousness in space and time. Logic shows that being must have the logical form of self-knowing reason or idea, just as in other respects it must

have the logical form of mechanism, chemism and life. This, however, does not yet amount to the claim that being must take the form of actual life and actual self-knowledge. The personhood that is attributed to the idea — to God — in the *Logic* is thus also just the logical structure of personhood, not actual self-knowing personhood. As Williams puts it, the personhood of the *Logic* is a “general structure” that is not yet conceived “as existing for itself, or as ‘I’” (RRW 305). Such personhood is fully realised, Williams explains, only in self-conscious “spirit”, that is, in an actual community or sphere of ethical life that is, and knows itself to be, united by mutual recognition. Such spirit is, therefore, “personhood developed into its totality — that is, community” (RRW 265). This means in turn that God — the idea itself — actually exists as self-knowing personhood only in the form of “spirit in its community” (RRW 166). This is not to deny that personhood belongs logically to God as such, and that philosophy demonstrates this before it moves on to consider nature and human consciousness. Yet divine personhood, for Hegel, does not actually *exist* before there is human consciousness and spirit; rather, such spirit *is* “God existing as community” (*VRel* III: 254; see also RRW 255, 302).

Personhood and Mutual Recognition

As we have seen, personhood is made necessary logically by the concept. The concept as such particularises itself and then comes to be the explicitly self-relating totality of its moments, or the concept for itself, as singularity, and more precisely as “universal singularity” (see RRW 271). The concept as a whole, in the form of the syllogism, then further “particularises” itself by becoming objectivity; but it then recovers its singularity and explicit self-relation as idea, and supremely as self-knowing idea or personhood. Personhood is thus simply the fully developed universal singularity of the concept, or the “free subjective concept that is for itself” (*WL, GW* 12: 236 / *M* 824, trans. modified; see RRW 225).

The concept, however, is not just a simple, self-enclosed unity, but a unity of different moments. Personhood itself, therefore, must be a unity mediated by difference (see, e.g., RRW 221). This in turn has a direct bearing on the character of the spirit or “concrete universality” that realises, and finds its logical “condition” in, personhood (RRW 269).

Since personhood is mediated by difference, and indeed is a further form of the conceptual “*free love*” that lets its different determinations go free, even while it continues itself through them, personhood must let its own differences go free and not seek to be a

“substantial” power over them. Equally, the concrete human spirit that realises this logical idea of personhood must also let its differences go free and so be informed by “*free love*”. Such spirit, or ethical life, cannot, therefore, be founded on an abstract, self-regarding personhood that seeks to isolate itself from other persons, but must rest on personhood that is willing to “surrender its isolation and separateness” and form a loving unity with others (*VRel* III: 211; see also *RRW* 269).

In his *Philosophy of Right*, however, Hegel argues that personhood, as a form of human self-consciousness rather than just a feature of the logical idea, initially takes itself to be the bearer of what he calls “abstract right” — right that belongs immediately to me as this specific individual (see *PhR* §§ 34-35). The person, who is conscious of his or her abstract right, thus focuses above all on his or her own entitlements. Yet such personhood is not purely self-regarding, for it also recognises that other persons have rights, indeed that right belongs to every person as such. So although the rights-bearing person is conscious of his or her own rights and, if necessary, asserts them against others, he or she also recognises the imperative to “*respect others as persons*” (*PhR* § 36). Personhood even in this initial “abstract” form thus entails mutual recognition.

Hegel then goes on to argue in both his *Philosophy of Right* and *Philosophy of Religion* that persons in genuine ethical life — the spirit that most fully realises the logical idea of personhood — must embrace mutual recognition in a further, more profound, way. As ethical beings, we must not only recognise the rights of others, but we must also see others in their differences as integral to our own identity. Note that, for Hegel, such an explicit embrace of community does not represent a betrayal of the idea of personhood (or “personality”), but rather its fulfilment. In Hegel’s words,

Ethical life, love, means precisely the giving up of particularity, of particular personality, and its extension to universality — so, too, with friendship. In friendship and love I give up my abstract personality and thereby win it back as concrete. The truth of personality [*das Wahre der Persönlichkeit*] is found precisely in winning it back through this immersion, this being immersed in the other (*VRel* III: 211).

To repeat: personhood, as a further form of the concept, is a unity that is mediated by difference, or what Williams calls “a social unity in and through difference” (*RRW* 150).

Accordingly, the idea, or God, as the bearer of personhood cannot manifest itself in human self-consciousness that simply clings on to itself in opposition to others. As Williams puts it, “God is the primordial *anti-solipsist* in search of relation to and community with others” (RRW 279). The community that constitutes the actual existence of God’s personhood must, therefore, be one founded on love, reconciliation and mutual recognition (though it will also incorporate a consciousness of individual right).¹⁵

The Theological Conception of God

As we have noted, Hegel equates the logical idea with “God” (see *VRel* III: 197). Yet, for Hegel, God as conceived by religion and theology also differs subtly from the merely logical idea. This difference is due partly to the fact that religion conceives of God through representations, images and metaphors, rather than pure concepts. It is, however, also due to the fact that religion builds the idea of spirit, as well as related notions such as incarnation, *into* God, whereas philosophy regards spirit as the logical successor to the “idea” as such, a successor that is mediated by nature.¹⁶

Religion and philosophy agree, however, that God’s personhood must be understood as (or on the model of) “love” and that such personhood actually exists in the form of human communities founded on love and mutual recognition. In particular, as Williams notes, Hegel understands Christianity to be “a religion of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and universal freedom” (RRW 305). Indeed, he takes the Christian God to *be* “self-sacrificing love” that “out of compassion identifies with and shares human finitude, and, by obedient suffering to the point of death, puts death itself to death, and is resurrected as absolute spirit” (RRW 295; see also 275, 297). The Christian God, in Hegel’s interpretation, thus exhibits most clearly the personhood that “surrender[s] its isolation and separateness” and realises itself “in friendship and love” (*VRel* III: 211; see also RRW 269).

Williams’ account of Hegel’s conception of God is, in my view, profoundly insightful and sheds welcome light especially on Hegel’s understanding of the personhood of God. Williams emphasises that God, for Hegel, is not *a* person (and so not a finite subject), but is, or exhibits, personhood (see RRW 158, 163, 190); and he also highlights the fact that, for Hegel, divine personhood realises itself in human spirit, spirit that takes the form of community (see RRW 265). All of this strikes me as exactly right. There is, however, one

aspect of Williams' account that seems to me to be problematic. It is this that I shall now consider.

A Problem in Williams' Account of Divine Personhood

As already noted, Williams rightly takes Hegel to conceive of God as existing concretely in the form of human community. God is love, and love is manifest and realised in a community based on mutual recognition. Accordingly, "the community itself is the existing Spirit, the Spirit in its existence, God existing as community" (*VRel* III: 254; see also RRW 302). Yet Williams also takes Hegel to conceive of God as being *in* a community with what is other than God. In my view, this claim is problematic, because it risks turning God into *a* person after all and so is in tension with the claim that God is, or exhibits, only personhood.

Williams maintains, for example, not only that God exists in and as the love and mutual recognition between human beings, but that Hegel also characterizes "inner-trinitarian relations as relations of mutual recognition" (RRW 236). In other words, Hegel takes God the Father and God the Son themselves to stand in a relation of love and mutual recognition. As Williams puts it, "Hegel uses the concept of recognition to portray the loving relation of father and son in the immanent trinity" (RRW 255). Williams notes that Hegel does not explicitly call God a "We", and so does not explicitly conflate the relation between Father and Son with that between two individual persons. Nonetheless, we are told, Hegel "conceives their relation as a recognitive unity in and through difference, a loving recognition that amounts to the same thing as the 'we' — i.e. an articulation that God is love" (RRW 276 n. 193). So, not only does God exist *as* mutual recognition, but God the Father is *in* a relation of mutual recognition with God the Son. This, however, risks turning God the Father into a person who recognises and is recognised by God the Son.

Similarly, Williams takes Hegel to understand God and humanity to be in a relation of mutual recognition with one another. Williams points out first that, for Hegel, God attains self-knowledge in humanity, and that God's self-knowledge and human knowledge of God are in fact the same thing. In Hegel's words, "humanity knows God only insofar as God knows godself in humanity. This knowledge is God's self-consciousness, but it is at same time a knowledge of God on the part of humanity; and this knowledge of God by humanity is the knowledge of humanity by God" (*VGottesbeweis* 302; see also RRW 278). Note that in these lines Hegel actually identifies God's self-knowledge with human knowledge of God.

This accords with the idea that God becomes incarnate in and as a human being and then, after Christ's death, exists *as* spirit, *as* human community based on love. Williams, however, interprets this *identity* of the divine and the human as a relation of mutual recognition *between* God and humanity: "Hegel's claim implies that the relation of God to finite spirit is a recognitive relation of spirit to spirit", a process of recognition in which "each is free in union with the other" (RRW 246, 278). As Williams also puts it, "there is no unbridgeable chasm between finite and infinite, but rather a free communicative relation between divine and human [...] a communicative exchange — mutual recognition" (RRW 292).

In mutual recognition as Hegel conceives it, however, two parties recognize one another's "complete personal independence".¹⁷ Spirit, for Hegel, divides itself into "different selves, which are, both in and for themselves and for one another, completely free, independent, absolutely obdurate [*spröde*], resistant" (*Enz* § 436 Z; see also RRW 267-68). It is true that the selves are also "identical with one another, hence not self-subsistent, not impermeable" because they have "as it were, merged together" (*gleichsam zusammengeflossen*). Yet they are united in their independence: mutual recognition, for Hegel, is a union of two (or more) selves who let one another go free and so recognize their separate (as well as their shared) identities (see, e.g., *PhG*, *GW* 9: 109-10 / *M* ¶ 181-83). Consequently, if God and humanity are held to stand in a "recognitive relation" to one another, or even just in a relation that is "like mutual recognition" (RRW 281), this risks transforming God into an independent being that is other than humanity. This, however, would conflict with Hegel's view, emphasised repeatedly by Williams, that God is not a person, but is, or exhibits, *personhood*.

This problem has its source, I think, in Williams' conflation of two related but distinct ideas. Williams rightly recognizes that Hegel conceives of the concept and idea — and thus of God — as the "speculative concrete", that is, as a "unity in and through difference" (RRW 255). Yet he also conflates this "speculative concrete" with mutual recognition and so assumes that a unity through *difference* invariably entails the reciprocal mediation by two moments of *one another*. This conflation in turn rests on equating difference with otherness, an equation that in my view is not justified by Hegel's logic.

It is true that Williams acknowledges a difference between difference and otherness. He does so, for example, in the following passage, in which he distinguishes the absolute idea from spirit. "Where the absolute idea *differentiates* itself", Williams writes, "spirit *doubles* itself (exhibiting the dialectic of the something and other), *objectifies* itself in its other (being-

for-other), and in this other spirit recognizes itself and loves itself and other in this union” (RRW 242). In this passage, therefore, Williams rightly highlights the difference between (a) the process of self-differentiation that characterises the concept and the idea, and (b) the process of doubling oneself, or becoming other than oneself, that characterizes spirit. This difference in turn reflects the logical distinction between, on the one hand, the true infinite, which is the “speculative nucleus” of Hegel’s philosophy and prefigures the concept and idea, and, on the other hand, the relation between “something” and “other” (RRW 235).

Yet Williams does not adhere consistently to this distinction, but allows the difference that belongs to the infinite, the concept and the idea to become intertwined with otherness. So, for example, after noting that the true infinite is the “speculative nucleus” of Hegel’s philosophy, Williams states that it “sums up the dialectical holism begun in the dialectic of determinacy, something and other” (RRW 235). In another passage, Williams examines the relation of something and other explicitly but then connects that relation directly with the concept. “As we have seen”, he writes, “the unity of concept and actuality in and through difference constitutes the absolute idea *both* as the ontological proof and as an articulated trinitarian totality. But it is anticipated here in the dialectical analysis of something and other, [...] because each [...] is *identical* with the other only through their mutual *difference* from each other” (RRW 213-14). The consequence, however, of blurring the distinction between the infinite, concept and idea, on the one hand, and the something-other relation, on the other, is that the moments of the concept and idea are understood to be *other* than one another, and the concept and idea are themselves taken to be *other* than what they differ from. This then opens the door to thinking of God the Father as other than God the Son and to thinking of God and humanity as other than one another; and such otherness in turn grounds the thought that God and humanity are in a relation of mutual recognition in which each recognises itself in the *other*. As noted above, conceiving of God and humanity in this way then risks turning God into a person who recognizes and is recognized by humanity.

Otherness and Difference

Williams is right to note that both something and the true infinite enjoy their identity only in and through difference. There is, however, a clear logical distinction between something and the true infinite, a distinction of which Williams is by no means unaware.

At the start of the *Logic*, being and nothing are immediately different, but since this difference is utterly indeterminate, each vanishes immediately into its counterpart and indeed proves to be nothing but such vanishing, which Hegel names “becoming” (*WL, GW 21: 69-70 / M 82-83*).¹⁸ The difference between reality and negation in determinate being is different from this immediate, indeterminate difference. It is a *determinate* difference in which each category is implicitly or explicitly the negation of its counterpart. In reality, Hegel writes, “the fact is concealed that it contains determinateness and therefore also negation”, but it does, indeed, “contain the moment of the negative and is through this alone the determinate being that it is” (*WL, GW 21: 99-100 / M 111-12*). So, whereas being and nothing are immediately different — being is being, and nothing is nothing — reality and negation are bound together as the negation of one another: each is itself in *not-being-the-other*. The two categories are thus not just indifferent to one another, but form two sides of a single difference: each is not merely *this*, but rather *this, not that*. Determinate difference, therefore, is the difference between two one-sided terms that are bound together through not-being-one-another.¹⁹

Strictly speaking, however, reality and negation are not the negation of one “another”, since they are not yet explicitly “something” and something “else” or “other”. (The same is true of being and nothing). Being “something” or “other” includes being determinate — that is, being real and negative — but it also has a subtly different logical structure. Reality and negation, as we have just noted, are two sides of one difference: each is what it is in not-being-the-other. Something, by contrast, stands apart from its other, and the latter stands apart from it. To be something, therefore, is to be a separate entity, an entity that is wholly “self-relating” (*WL, GW 21: 103 / M 115*).²⁰ Similarly, to be other is also to be separate from its counterpart and to have an identity of its own. That which is other is, of course, *not* that which it is other than: it is the negation of its counterpart. Yet it is not merely the negation of the latter, since it is not bound to it, as negation is bound to reality, but it stands apart from it as a separate entity. The other is thus a negation that is not just negation, or the “negation of negation”, and the same is true of every something (*WL, GW 21: 103 / M 115*).

Later in the *Logic* the idea of being something is brought together with that of simple negation in the idea of the limit. A limited something is thus a something, and so in that respect is separate from its other, but it is also the explicit negation or limit of its other, and in that respect is bound to the other by that limit. The limit thus both conjoins and disjoins something and its other (see *WL, GW 21: 113-15 / M 126-27*).

Note that Williams is right to see in the something-other relation a unity of identity and difference, since every something has a separate identity but it has this only insofar as it is other than something else. Its identity is thus mediated by differing from — being other than — its counterpart (see RRW 210). It is important to recognise, however, that the relation between the finite and the true infinite is no longer that of something to something else.

The so-called bad infinite is, indeed, other than the finite, which is in turn other than it, but the structure of the true infinite is different. Hegel conceives of the true infinite as the *process* of its finite *moments* (WL, GW 21: 135 / M 147-48).²¹ Note that there is a logical difference between the infinite process itself and the finite moments that comprise it. Yet the latter are not, and cannot be, something *other* than that process and do not stand apart from it; they are, rather, the finite moments *of* that process itself, and this process is just the process *of* those moments. Finite things are, indeed, other than one another, since each is a something in its own right. Finite things are not, however, other than the true infinite, and the latter is not something other than them. They are, rather, “ideal” moments *of* the infinite process to which they belong (where “ideal” does not mean non-existent, but rather non-self-subsistent) (WL, GW 21: 137 / M 149-50).

More needs to be said to make the structure of the true infinite fully clear.²² Enough has been said, however, to show that the latter does not simply “sum up the dialectical holism begun in the dialectic of determinacy, something and other” (RRW 235). It is true that the true infinite, like something, has its identity in and through difference. In the case of the true infinite, however, that which is different from it — namely the finite — is not something *other* than it, but rather a constitutive *moment* of it.

The true infinite, Hegel claims, is the “basic concept of philosophy” and in that sense anticipates both the concept and idea (*Enz* § 95 A; see also RRW 235). This is not to deny that there is a subtle difference between the true infinite and the concept. The true infinite coincides with the “ideality” of the finite insofar as it is the process of its finite moments, whereas the concept is the actively self-determining universal that particularises and singularises itself. Nonetheless, true infinity and the concept are alike insofar as the different moments they contain are not something *other* than them. The particular and the singular are, indeed, different from the universal, but they are not other than it, since it continues itself in them and they are therefore just the universal *itself* in a different form. Similarly, nature is not something other than the idea, but it is the idea *itself* in the form of otherness; and spirit is

also not something other than the idea, but is simply the idea that has returned to itself from its otherness, that is, the idea that has become conscious of itself in humanity (*Enz* § 18).²³

Strictly speaking, therefore, the idea or God is not something other than humanity, and so cannot enter into a relation of mutual recognition with the latter. This is not to deny that God comes to self-consciousness in and as humanity, and so exists “as spirit in its community”, a community of mutual recognition; Williams is absolutely right about this (RRW 305). Yet God cannot stand in a relation *to* humanity or “recognise” the latter, and cannot be recognised in turn as “completely free, independent” (*Enz* § 436 Z; see also RRW 267). God is *different* from humanity, since God is infinite reason that comes to self-consciousness in finite humanity; yet God is not *other* than humanity, since humanity is the self-consciousness *of* God or the idea itself. Williams overlooks this point, in my view, because he does not distinguish consistently between the unity-in-difference exhibited by the concept and idea and that exhibited by something in its relation to its other. To put it another way, Williams conflates unity-in-difference with mutual recognition and so argues not only that God exists *as* mutual recognition, but also that God stands *in* a relation of mutual recognition with humanity.²⁴

Now God is, indeed, initially “other” than humanity for religious representation, since the latter is “the form of otherness for consciousness” (*PhG*, *GW* 9: 426 / *M* ¶ 796). Representation also attributes various human emotions to God (such as repentance) (*VRel* I: 293).²⁵ So in this sense representation can picture God and humanity as recognising and loving one another. Yet the “otherness” of God is removed by religious representation in the notion of the incarnation when God becomes one with humanity. Furthermore, in the cultus the human subject is “put on an identical footing with the divine” (*identisch mit dem Göttlichen gesetzt*) as God comes to presence as Holy Spirit within worshippers (*VRel* I: 260n; see also RRW 292). Thus, not only is the logical idea one with humanity in our consciousness of it, but religion also represents God as one with humanity in the cultus.²⁶

Williams rightly points out that Hegel rejects the simple claim that humanity *is* God (RRW 280, 292). Hegel’s point, however, is not that God and humanity are other than one another, but that God is not reducible to humanity. God after all is infinite reason that comes to self-consciousness in finite human beings and, as we have seen, there is a difference for Hegel between being infinite and being finite. This difference lies in the fact that the finite is a *moment* of the infinite; finite human beings, therefore, are moments of God, insofar as they are the beings in which God comes to self-knowledge. Yet to repeat, human beings are not

other than God, and God is not other than them, since God comes to exist *as* human self-consciousness and so the “knowledge of God by humanity *is* the knowledge of humanity by God” (*VGottesbeweis* 302, emphasis added; see also RRW 278).

I should stress at this point that my disagreement with Williams is a limited one. I agree very much with his claim that God is not *a* person but is, or exhibits, personhood, and that such personhood realises itself in a loving human community based on mutual recognition. My concern, however, is that Williams too readily conflates unity-in-difference with mutual recognition and so extends the latter to God’s relation to humanity. Accordingly, Williams contends not only that God becomes, and exists *as*, the human community of mutual recognition, but also that in the process God and humanity recognise one another. This, however, risks turning God into a person, even though Williams rightly rejects this view.²⁷

Right and Mutual Recognition

To conclude this essay I will briefly note one further respect in which the primacy Williams gives to mutual recognition leads to a subtle distortion of an aspect of Hegel’s position. Williams contends that *right* (*Recht*) in Hegel’s system presupposes mutual recognition, and in one sense this is correct since mutual recognition is a necessary stage in the logical derivation of right in the *Encyclopaedia* (see RRW 172, and *Enz* §§ 436-37). Yet right, for Hegel, has its immediate source in the free will that wills itself, not in mutual recognition as such (see *PhR* §§ 27, 29). This is why, as Williams himself acknowledges, right initially belongs to the individual person (see RRW 180, and *PhR* §§ 34-35). My right is *my* freedom as an individual that must be respected by other free individuals and so, in Hegel’s words, is “something *utterly sacred*” (*PhR* § 30). Right, however, is also universal and so requires me — indeed, all free individuals — to respect others as persons, too. As Hegel puts it, “the commandment of right is therefore: *be a person and respect others as persons*” (*PhR* § 36). In this way, right makes mutual recognition necessary: it commands that free persons recognise and respect one another. Note the logical priority here: right grounds mutual recognition, the latter does not ground the former. Williams argues, by contrast, that “the mediation of freedom and self-identity in mutual recognition is the foundation of right [...], and not the other way around” (RRW 173; see also 268). In saying this, however, Williams risks overlooking an important nuance of Hegel’s theory of right.²⁸

As just noted, mutual recognition is a necessary stage in the logical derivation of right (along with reason, language, thought and will). It is also true that right must be “*universally recognized, known, and willed*” in order to have “validity and objective actuality”, that is, to have force in society (*PhR* § 209). In these senses, therefore, Williams is correct to maintain that right presupposes (though does not exhaust) mutual recognition (RRW 215). Yet this is not, and cannot be, true of the *imperative* within right: for that imperative demands that persons recognise one another, even if, indeed especially if, they do not already do so. If this imperative were itself to presuppose mutual recognition, then it would disappear when the latter is lacking. In fact, however, it binds the free will precisely *when* mutual recognition is lacking, and so in that respect cannot presuppose such recognition.

Williams is aware that, in his own words, “there is mutual recognition in abstract right”.²⁹ Yet his overriding insistence that “mutual recognition is the *foundation* of right” (RRW 173, emphasis added) leads him, in my view, to obscure, or at least to downplay, Hegel’s insight that right is itself in one respect — namely, as the bearer of an imperative — the foundation of mutual recognition.

I should stress again, however, that my disagreement with Williams is limited. I agree very much with his argument that true human community — one that realizes the “personhood” of God — is to be found in “the general process of mutual recognition constitutive of ethical life and spirit” (RRW 173). I agree, too, with his claim that such recognition should take the form not only of respect for legal, social and political right, but also of “love, forgiveness, [and] reconciliation” (RRW 305). I would, however, like to suggest a “friendly amendment” to Williams’ account of mutual recognition. This is that such recognition not be taken as the model for all unity-in-difference and thus as the unambiguous *foundation* of freedom, but that it be understood, rather, as one form of unity-in-difference that constitutes one — albeit essential — component of freedom.

Sadly, we will never know how Williams would have responded to such a suggestion. I am grateful, however, for having had the opportunity to think about the issues discussed in his important book. I am very grateful, too, for the conversations we were able to have together, both in person and in print, over many years. Williams wrote with eloquence and insight about mutual recognition (as well as many other topics), and he practised in an exemplary way what he preached. It was a privilege to know him.

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¹ Mention should be made here of Seth (1893), though Seth's book is a set of lectures, rather than a monograph, and does not provide a detailed study of Hegel on personhood in the way Williams' book does. Seth expresses great admiration for Hegel, but he argues that Hegel's theory not only "deprives man of his proper self, by reducing him, as it were, to an object of a universal Thinker", but "leaves this universal Thinker also without any true personality". By such "personality" or "subjectivity", however, Seth understands "an existence of God for Himself, analogous to our own personal existence, though doubtless transcending it infinitely in innumerable ways" (Seth [1893], 233-34). Seth thus appears to equate God's personality with his being *a* person in precisely the way that Williams rejects (see RRW 158) — though Seth also acknowledges that "God may, nay must, be infinitely more [...] than we know ourselves to be" (Seth [1893], 235).

² See Spinoza (1994), 102 [*Ethics* IP25]: "God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence", and 103 [*Ethics* IP25Cor.]: "Particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, or modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way".

³ See Houlgate (2005b), 22. Note by the way that, as far as I can see, Williams does not distinguish, as I do here, between Hegel's Spinoza and Spinoza himself.

⁴ Hegel is right to claim that Spinozan substance does not contain, or "progress" to, the negative, but he appears to believe that, as a consequence, differences between the modes are "made by an external intellect", not by substance itself (*WL, GW* 21: 82, 101 / *M* 95, 113). Yet Spinoza insists that substance is the cause of its different modes, just as it is the cause of itself, even though it lacks negation (see Spinoza [1994], 85-86, 102 [*Ethics* ID1, ID6 and Exp., IP25 and Schol.]). Hegel would, however, criticise Spinoza's conception of substance, even if he were to have a better understanding of it: for, according to his own "speculative" account of substance and causality in the *Logic*, neither category is intelligible without "reflexion" and thus negation (see *WL, GW* 11: 249-50, 393 ff. / *M* 399-400, 554 ff.).

⁵ See Houlgate (2005b), 26.

⁶ See also Hegel (1981), 100-01: "Reason is therefore my singularity: it is not immediate but universal singularity [*allgemeine Einzelheit*]".

⁷ On the unity of thought and being in Hegel's *Logic*, see Houlgate (2006), 115-31.

⁸ In this sense, Williams argues, the process in which the concept *objectifies* itself in the *Logic* constitutes Hegel's "reconstruction" of the traditional ontological argument for God's existence (see RRW 149-51, 238). It is important to emphasise, however, that in this process the concept does not first acquire being as such — since all categories unite thought and being — but acquires the distinctive form of being or existence that Hegel calls "objectivity" and that logically prefigures nature.

⁹ For Hegel's own explicit remarks on the "personhood" of the idea, see *WL, GW* 12: 236, 251 / *M* 824, 841.

¹⁰ See Spinoza [1994], 85, 90, 117 [*Ethics* ID4, IP10Schol., IIP1-2].

¹¹ See Spinoza [1994], 105 [*Ethics* IP30 and Dem.].

¹² See Spinoza [1994], 104-05 [*Ethics* IP29Schol.]: "by *Natura Naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, [...] that is [...], God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. But by *Natura Naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature", and 105 [*Ethics* IP31]: "The actual intellect, whether finite or infinite [...] must be referred to *Natura Naturata*, not to *Natura Naturans*".

¹³ This is the element of truth in Hegel's otherwise questionable claim that Spinozan "substance does not even reach the determination of being-for-self, much less that of subject and spirit" (*WL, GW* 21: 148 / *M* 161).

¹⁴ See Spinoza (1994), 85, 93 [*Ethics* ID6, IP14], and *VRel* III: 197: "God as the absolute idea".

¹⁵ Williams rightly emphasises that a properly ethical community, founded on a shared sense of reconciliation, by no means suppresses individual differences and rights. Mutual recognition is, among other things, the shared recognition and affirmation of such differences. Accordingly, as Williams puts it, "spirit is universal singularity that includes both the individual and social forms of personhood" (RRW 307; see also 157, 227).

¹⁶ See, e.g., RRW 241: "the absolute idea is the ultimate category and expression of Hegel's philosophical trinitarianism, and the absolute spirit is the ultimate category of Hegel's theological trinitarianism, which effects a synthesis of the living God of the absolute idea with Hegel's profound analyses of tragic evil, reconciling love, incarnation, mutual recognition, and spirit".

¹⁷ Hegel (1981), 76-77.

¹⁸ See also Houlgate (2006), 263-83.

¹⁹ See Houlgate (2006), 303-11.

²⁰ “Something is the *first negation of negation*, as simple self-relation in the form of being” (*als einfache seyende Beziehung auf sich*). See also Houlgate (2006), 314-17.

²¹ See also Houlgate (2006), 423-27.

²² See Houlgate (2006), 423-35.

²³ “II. The *Philosophy of nature*, as the science of the Idea in its otherness [*in ihrem Andersseyn*]. III. The *Philosophy of Spirit*, as the Idea that returns into itself out of its otherness [*aus ihrem Andersseyn*]”.

²⁴ One can already see this problem in Williams’ conception of the true infinite and the corresponding “ideality of the finite”. Williams recognises that “the ideality of the finite” means, not that the finite does not exist, but that “finitude is a moment or member of the true infinite as an articulated whole” (RRW 80). Yet he goes on to talk of the “utter dependence of the finite on [the] infinite” and of the finite as “the appearance of the infinite” (RRW 284). In my view, however, these latter formulations are in tension with the idea of the “ideality of the finite”: for they turn the finite into that which has its *ground* in the infinite — and so turn the infinite into something other than the finite — whereas “ideal” moments logically *coincide* with the process to which they belong.

²⁵ See also RRW 279 on God’s “need”.

²⁶ See Houlgate (2005a), 249.

²⁷ The concern raised in this essay echoes one that I raised over twenty years ago about Williams’ otherwise excellent — and, for me, enormously influential — book on recognition (Williams [1992]). My concern then was that, for Williams, Hegelian “absolute knowing” is “a knowing which relates to a sphere of *otherness* that it lets go free”, whereas, in my view, it is a knowing in which and for which thought and being are understood to be “*identical in form*” (Houlgate [1994], 5, 15, emphasis added). For Williams’ response to my earlier essay, see Williams (1995).

²⁸ See Houlgate (2017), 42.

²⁹ Williams (1997), 138.