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### Travelling philosophy : from literature to film

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## Part II. Fight Club

### I. Self and Consumer Culture: The Phenomenological Philosophy of *Fight Club*

In my endeavor to gain a deeper understanding of *Fight Club*'s philosophical dialectic, I was drawn by the inescapable pull of the dense and often puzzling black hole known as phenomenology. While German philosopher Georg W.F. Hegel is generally known as the forerunner of phenomenological thought, it was Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl who officially announced modern phenomenology in his work *Logical Investigations* (1900).<sup>127</sup> Characterized by a number of prominent themes, phenomenology is generally considered a radical, unconventional style of philosophizing that has never really developed a set of dogmas or sedimented into a system (Moran 2002: 4). Primarily, in its quest for the truth of appearances, phenomenology attempts to steer clear of prior obligations (cultural, religious, scientific) placed on the experiencing subject, and it aims to describe material and mental "phenomena" (appearances) as they manifest to the subject's consciousness.

It is this unconventional philosophy, and a particular aspect of Hegel's brand, that best contextualizes the actions of *Fight Club*'s protagonist who – in reaction to the emotionally barren landscape of American consumer society – seeks a higher level of self-consciousness. In his labyrinthine *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807), Hegel traces the development of self-consciousness and imagines the thinking subject as "Geist," a noumenal spirit, or a posited object as it appears in itself independent of the senses. In this way, the traditional philosophical problem of the consciousness of objects and others is reconceived as the spirit's relation to itself. Hegel envisions this self-determining activity as a kind of: "self-moving selfsameness, or a reflection into self, the moment of the 'I,' for itself, pure negativity, or, simple becoming" (19). University of Chicago professor Robert B. Pippin sees this activity – directed toward the final understanding of the "Absolute" (Geist) – as the "I's" self-reflection and self-determination:

Since, Hegel tries to show, any possible cognitive relation to objects must involve the "I's" taking up the world "for itself," and so some sort of self-relation, or apperception, understanding theoretically how a subject could come to know itself in its relation to all otherness (and understanding this finally and without skeptical doubt) is how Hegel wants to understand 'the Absolute as Spirit' and how he wants to be understood when he claims that 'the Spirit that, so developed, knows itself as Spirit...'" (1993: 59).

For Hegel, the significance of the sensual world – comprised of material phenomenon (both passive objects and active individuals) – is found only in the manner the experiencing subject renders it intelligible. Consciously experiencing the world is not merely directly attending to some "other than consciousness," but, as lest indirectly or implicitly to itself, its own mode of comportment, a mode at least relatively empirically independent.<sup>128</sup> The experiencing subject is only relatively independent because it is

<sup>127</sup> Moran Dermot, *Phenomenology* (London: Routledge Publishers, 2002), 1: "Phenomenology, as the movement inaugurated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), is now a century old. It was one of several strong currents in philosophy prominent at the outset of the twentieth century, alongside, for example, Neo-Kantianism in its various schools."

<sup>128</sup> Robert B. Pippin, "You Can't Get There from Here: Transition Problems in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, edited by Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 62-63: "(Hegel) maintains explicitly in the compressed opening passages of Chapter Four, that the 'knowing of an other' has been 'preserved' in the expanded

driven to the world by biological desires such as reproduction and hunger. Furthermore, these natural urges force the subject into the experience with other that is required to achieve self-consciousness, or self-relation in relation to other.

The subject's comprehension of its association with the world is always based on a self-conception, which centers on self-reflection. However, the self cannot be an internal object of self-examination. Rather, the self must project itself into the world in order to achieve self-consciousness via a negative relation. Hegel does not believe that the self's negative relation to passive objects, or its independence of such objects, is sufficient to establish itself as self-determining and self-conscious. He resolves this by suggesting that unifying "satisfaction" can only occur by means of an experience with another free, self-determining being: "...self-consciousness finds its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (1967:108). Hegel's language implies that the opposition offered by another self-consciousness to the realization of my natural desires is empirically different than that posed by passive objects. It is the interaction between two active, willful subjects that results in the rendering of each other as an object. This enables each subject's negative independence and provides an occasion for confirming its own subjectivity.<sup>129</sup>

It is in light of this negative establishment of subjectivity that Hegel claims: "there is a self-consciousness for a self-consciousness" (108). A completed self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness; self-consciousness "is" only in being recognized, which Hegel refers to as a kind of "duplicated" self-consciousness.<sup>130</sup> In other words, a realized self-consciousness lives outside itself in another self-consciousness. However, prior to this realization, a self-consciousness aims to eradicate this alien other, but, in being so set, it is both set to eliminate the other in order to achieve its own self-certainty, and also itself in the process, since it is itself that other (Findlay 1977: 520). Thus, to avoid a kind of self-destruction and attain self-certainty, one must recognize oneself in the other. In this way, Hegel argues, each uses the other as a means to a self-realizing end.<sup>131</sup> The recognition of self in its other is initially presented in a one-sided form in which only the one does the recognizing and the other is merely recognized. This simple "being-for-self" is attached to an immediate individuality and excludes all others from itself. Elaborating on this point, Boston University professor J.N. Findlay writes:

Self at first confronts self, not as an infinite negation of the negation making all its own, but as a simple case of natural being facing another such case, both

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account of knowledge as self-conscious knowledge." Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Mind*, translated by J.B. Bailie, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), 104: "...for any self-consciousness the entire 'expanse of the sensuous world is preserved for it, but at the same time, only as related to the second moment, the unity of self-consciousness with itself.'"

<sup>129</sup> Pippin, "You Can't Get There From Here" (1993), 68. Pippin writes that such an oppositional situation: "provides the opportunity for a kind of confirmation of my subjectivity in the possibility of a genuinely 'mutual recognition' of such subjectivity."

<sup>130</sup> Georg W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111: "Self-consciousness is faced with another self-consciousness: it has come out of itself. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in doing so it has superceded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other it sees its own self."

<sup>131</sup> J.N. Findlay, "The Phenomenology of the Spirit: An Analysis of the Text," in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 521: "Separate consciousnesses re-enact at a higher lever the action of mutually soliciting forces which, in soliciting each other, in effect put themselves forth. Each uses the other as the means by which it achieves self-consciousness. To mutual solicitation mutual recognition here corresponds, as well as the recognition of mutual recognition."

deeply absorbed in the business of living. Each conscious only of its own being, and so has no true certainty of itself, since the being of the self is essentially a socially recognized being (1977: 521).

In Findlay's view, genuine self-consciousness must express itself as the negation of all mere objectivity and particularity, which initially takes the form of desiring death of the other at the risk of its own life. Hegel argues that the oppositional consciousnesses must:

...engage this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being for themselves to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained" (1977: 114).

Authentic self-consciousness springs from the willingness to sacrifice everything and, as a result, a life and death struggle arises between the two rival self-consciousnesses in which one is inevitably made dependent by its demotion.

Likening this new relationship to that between a lord and a bondsman, Hegel writes (189): "The one is independent, and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other is dependent, and its essence is life or existence for another. The former is the Master, or Lord, the latter the Bondsman" (1977: 115). Considering Hegel's view, Findlay argues:

The self-consciousness of the lord is essentially related to the being of the mere things he uses and uses up, and these he enjoys through the bondsman's self-consciousness. The bondsman prepares and arranges things for the enjoyment of the lord. (...) It is the lord who reaps the enjoyment from the bondsman's labors (1977: 521).

In this disproportionate relationship, the bondsman altogether gives his being-for-self in favor of the lord, which means the lord cannot get the reciprocal recognition that his self-consciousness demands from a consciousness so degraded. What the lord sees in the bondsman, or what the bondsman sees in the lord, is not what either sees in himself (522). In light of Findlay's point, the lord's "lordship" depends on the bondsman's self-consciousness and, therefore, the validity of independent self-consciousness is found in the bondsman's self-consciousness rather than in the lord's. It is, ultimately, the bondsman's admiration for the lord that removes the narrow self-identifications and self-interest and enables him to attain absolute negativity – true self-consciousness. Within this admiration, the bondsman has the real advantage in that working in and on the world he preserves his labor and makes the outward thing his own, whereas the lord's dealings with the object merely results in fading pleasures (522). Hegel puts it this way:

Through work and labor, however, this consciousness of the bondsman comes to itself. In the moment which corresponds to desire in the case of the master's consciousness, the aspect of the non-essential relation to the things seemed to fall to the lot of the servant, since the thing there retained its independence. Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby unalloyed feeling of the self. This satisfaction, however, just for that reason is itself only a state of evanescence, for it lacks objectivity or subsistence (1977: 118).

Thus, it is the bondsman who overcomes the otherness more completely than the lord and, in doing so, achieves a more genuine self-consciousness.<sup>132</sup> The bondsman

<sup>132</sup> Findlay, "Phenomenology: An Analysis" (1977), 522: "The bondsman overcomes the otherness and mere existence of material "thinghood" more thoroughly than the lord, and so achieves a more genuine self-consciousness."

transcends the fear which was his initial response to the otherness as embodied in the lord.<sup>133</sup>

As a result – while the bondsman achieved a kind of self-consciousness by discovering himself in opposition to otherness – a higher version is obtained “in” the otherness. In other words, it is not mastery of the other, but recognizing it and yielding to it, consciously subjecting oneself to it that accomplishes this. Along these lines, Findlay suggests that a period of subjection to others is essential to the highest rationality, and not to have undergone such discipline results in a trivialization of self-consciousness, which never rises above petty finite interests (1977: 522).

It is Hegel’s dialectic of the lord and the bondsman and its implications on the establishment of self-consciousness that provides a philosophical context for the *Fight Club* narrative texts. In the novel and the film, the protagonist reflexively projects his subconscious desires into the sensual world in order to establish his subjectivity by a negation from another self-consciousness, which is paradoxically himself, or the character known as Tyler Durden. Viewed in this way, the novel presents a variation on this Hegelian theme in that the protagonist’s primary negative relation is not with other individuals, but rather with a mental projection of what he desires to be. What is more, the protagonist’s need to be someone who owns “Swedish furniture” and “clever art” is conditioned by the sensual world, namely through the advertised images essential to the economic vitality of the consumer culture he inhabits.

As a consequence of his conditioned desires, the protagonist finds himself trapped in Hegel’s notion of a “desiring” consciousness, or the primitive stage that precedes either “servant” or “mastery” consciousness. While Tyler initially appears to be the bohemian revolutionary, or the kind of “lacerated” consciousness the protagonist longs to be, he is actually the mastery consciousness that permits the protagonist to see himself as the unifying principle, which is characteristic of an “understanding” consciousness.<sup>134</sup> As the lord-like other, Tyler provides a Hegelian negative relation that the protagonist must “fight” so that he can ultimately realize the true nature his subjectivity and achieve a genuine level of self-understanding. Considering these concepts, I examine the novel’s and then the film’s presentation of the intimately human effort to achieve a higher plane of self-consciousness by attempting to answer the question: What is the self?

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<sup>133</sup> John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (London: The Penguin Publishing Group, 1987), 40. Although couched in a Christian theology, the task of Bunyan’s protagonist “Christian,” who must also transcend his fear and sinful servitude by traveling to the Celestial City, is not so different that Hegel’s bondsman. Christian states: “I am sure to be in safety there. I must venture: to go back is nothing but death, to go forward is fear of death, and life everlasting beyond it. I will yet go forward.”

<sup>134</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1977), 104-138. Hegel generally outlines the evolution of self-consciousness, and there are several stages in particular that help us understand the protagonist and his alter-ego – Tyler. “Desiring” consciousness began with primitive humans whose identity was bound up with fulfilling their needs and others were merely obstacles that stood in the way. As a result of this, fights erupted and people banded in larger groups. Thus, the “lord” and “bondsman” consciousnesses evolved. The latter is able to evolve, whereas the former is not. Paul Trejo, “Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind” (1993), (text online) accessed 26 April 2005, <http://eserver.org/philosophy/hegel-summary.html>: “Those who are neither average nor part of the cultural elite develop their own realm, the ‘lacerated’ consciousness.”