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# Erotic Desire in Hegel's *Phenomenology*

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## Abstract

Katherine Angel has recently challenged contemporary conceptions of erotic desire by suggesting that sex is a learning process in which we discover what it is to be a person. This paper brings her suggestion to bear on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It offers an interpretation of what Hegel calls 'immediate desire' and the experience an immediately desiring consciousness makes by reading a key paragraph through the lens of erotic desire. What the paper hopes to show is that Hegel's analysis of the experience of desire and the example of sexual encounters can be mutually illuminating.

'The unplucked apple, the beloved just out of touch, the meaning not quite attained are desirable objects of knowledge'.

Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*

## I. Introduction

In her recent work of nonfiction, *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*, Katherine Angel criticizes our current discourse surrounding erotic desire for misconstruing its nature.<sup>1</sup> She has in mind the wake of the me-too movement, which has brought to public awareness the extent to which heterosexual sex, even when it appeared to be wanted to the men involved, has been bad for women.<sup>2</sup> Kristen Roupenian's viral short story 'Cat Person' provides a case in point. It tells of a date gone wrong between Margot and Robert, two near-strangers unskilled at interpreting each other.<sup>3</sup> After Margot hesitantly agrees to go back to Robert's place, she admits the following to herself: 'Looking at him like that [...] Margot recoiled. But the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set into motion was overwhelming' (Roupenian 2019: 88). Despite the fact that Margot does not want to have sex with him, she concludes that it is too much trouble to reject his advances. And because she recoils only

inwardly, withholding her displeasure as best she can, Robert is surprised by her subsequent refusal to see him again. The story ends with him calling her a 'whore'.<sup>4</sup>

If erotic desire is understood primarily as a desire for sexual satisfaction, it bears a relation to a drive that human beings possess in virtue of what we might call their 'first nature'.<sup>5</sup> But erotic desire is a more complicated phenomenon, shaped by a representation of its object and by the social context in which this desire is developed and enacted. The stakes of erotic desire are higher and more fraught. Given the myriad ways in which sexual encounters can go badly, it has become increasingly common for people across the political spectrum to encourage women to be more confident in stating what it is that they do and do not want in bed. According to this argument, men cannot be expected to 'mind-read' women's desires, so the onus is on women to communicate their desires clearly before and during a sexual encounter.<sup>6</sup> Angel believes these recommendations to be misguided, for they assume that it is in women's hands to protect themselves from harm. But her main complaint is that they rest on a background assumption about the transparency of erotic desire. According to Angel, what stands in the way of better sex—of making sex in our social world 'good again'—is not mustering the confidence to say what you want, but knowing what you want. And coming to know what you want is learned (even if only ever provisionally) through practice, which in turn requires a safe space for exploration. In reminding us that erotic desire is often obscure, even to ourselves, Angel is channelling a longstanding association between sex and knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

What exactly does sexual exploration promise to disclose? Or what can we hope to learn through sex? Another way to put this would be to ask: what is the object of self-discovery in those instances in which erotic desire does become known? In this paper, I want to pursue the following suggestion from Angel's book:

In the final analysis, how we understand sex is inextricable from how we understand what it is to be a person. We cannot deny that we are flexible, social creatures, constantly ingesting, incorporating and reformulating what we take in. The fantasy of total autonomy, and of total self-knowledge, is not a fantasy; it is a nightmare. (Angel 2021: 114)

As she suggests, because sex calls on us to become porously interdependent, it has the power to disabuse us of this nightmarish fantasy about ourselves and to expose that we are 'flexible and social creatures, constantly ingesting, incorporating and reformulating what we take in'. But sex also introduces the difficulty of how to acknowledge this flexibility and interdependence without losing one's sense of oneself and of another as beings whose boundaries can be crossed. This

casts sex as an important avenue by which to learn something significant about subjectivity itself, about what it is to be a *subject* of desire.

This line of thinking brings me to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which provides resources that can help expand Angel's idea.<sup>8</sup> Hegel describes this text as an expedition in which knowledge is advanced through a long and arduous learning process he calls 'experience' (*Erfahrung*). For one, it is Hegel's concept of experience that aligns with Angel's interest in forms of sexual exploration that take place in the bedroom, so to speak, and not in the controlled environments of scientific studies. For another, it is Hegel's own discussion of immediate desire in the opening chapter of 'Self-Consciousness' that provides especially useful tools for developing her suggestion. My specific goal in this paper is to offer a reading of paragraph 175 through the lens of erotic desire, taking erotic desire as an example by which to examine the experiential process Hegel is here outlining. In this experience, I begin with an impoverished conception of the objective world as merely independent of me and then discover that what I actually desire—that which would bring me genuine satisfaction—can only be found through another subject of desire. For Hegel, it is by seeking its own satisfaction and failing to find it that consciousness in the form of immediate desire initiates a learning process that teaches it something about the structure of desire as well as about the world it confronts. What we find in this paragraph is that the very pursuit of gratification becomes a way of discovering not just what I happen to desire, but the very contours of reality.

Through my reading of ¶175, I want to make the larger case that the phenomenon of sex and the outline of Hegel's learning process are mutually illuminating. On the one hand, there is something distinctive about sex that can illustrate a process Hegel himself presents in relatively abstract terms. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to come up with a better example of this process than the vicissitudes of sexual encounters. On the other hand, there is something distinctive about the outline Hegel provides that makes it a valuable framework for clarifying the stakes of sexual encounters. The experience Hegel here describes can tell us something about the object of sexual exploration, for it is by pursuing desire's satisfaction that I am learning what it is to be a subject of desire, both in my case and in that of another.

Just to be clear, I am not arguing that Hegel's process can only be illustrated through sexual encounters; or that Hegel's chapter on desire is *about* erotic desire in a narrow sense; or that Hegel's resources exceed others (for example those of psychoanalysis) in clarifying the relationship between sex and knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the term 'erotic' is not a part of Hegel's official vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> That said, I will be following in the footsteps of Kojève (1980), Butler (2012) and Neuhauser (2009), which I will detail below. Bataille even went so far as to claim that '[e]roticism can only be envisaged dialectically, and conversely, the dialectician, if he

does not confine himself to formalism, necessarily has his eyes fixed on his own sexual experience' (Bataille 1986: 254). Bataille is thereby making the audacious suggestion that sex is the motor animating and inspiring Hegel's philosophical project as a whole. Since it is by no means common to read Hegel's discussion of desire through an erotic lens, my more modest proposal will need to be defended.<sup>11</sup>

Three features of sex are significant in the context of this paper. First, there is its first-personal phenomenology, for sexual desire often feels compulsive, like a force beyond one's deliberate control. This renders sex a very good candidate for the immediacy at issue in 'immediate' forms of desire. Second is the fact that sex involves the body and so engages what we might call the 'objective' side of being a person. Sex can thus be said to bring to the fore the fact that subjects are always also objects, essentially embodied creatures.<sup>12</sup> Although my focus will be on the subjective side of objectivity, rather than the objective side of subjectivity, the phenomenon of sex makes clear that these are indivisible sides of the same coin. Third, the kind of sex in question is between not just two members of the same natural species, but also two subjects or persons who bear a distinct relation to themselves, namely, who operate according to a self-conception. While this excludes some forms of sex, such as sex with inanimate objects or non-human animals, it highlights those forms that are at issue in contemporary debates.

There are influential accounts of the erotic in the history of philosophy that expand it well beyond sex. One account comes from Plato, who suggests that *Eros*—even when it initially appears in response to desirable bodies—can and should be redirected at the forms or ideas. He also warns that pursuing sexual satisfaction could hinder this learning process and prevent a student from turning their attention toward the true object of knowledge, which is distinct from anything available to the senses (*Republic*: 403b). Another account comes from Audre Lorde, who describes the erotic as a source of individual and collective power capable of instigating social transformation. In her view, the erotic has been 'relegated to the bedroom' in order to curtail the threat it poses to the status quo. Interestingly, she also speaks about the erotic in terms that echo Plato, calling the erotic the 'nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge' (Lorde 2007: 57).

I have chosen the broader term 'erotic' desire instead of the narrower term 'sexual' desire in the title of my paper because I want to preserve some of the above capaciousness associated with *Eros*. For Hegel, despite the fact that desire comes on the scene as 'immediate desire' (of which I believe sexual desire is an especially useful example), this is only its beginning, not its end. Hegel calls self-consciousness 'desire in general', suggesting that desire will persist throughout the *Phenomenology* as a motive force, even once its object develops beyond

its immediate form.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it is the impossibility of finding genuine satisfaction through immediate desire that propels the search for knowledge into subsequent chapters.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps all desire in Hegel's *Phenomenology* is in the end 'erotic' in this expanded sense. I will proceed in the following order: in the second section, I will explain what Hegel means by desire and by immediate desire; in the third section, I will delineate Hegel's distinct concept of experience; in the fourth section, I will address my reasons for reading the experience of immediate desire through an erotic lens; in the fifth section, I will present my reading of ¶175; and in the sixth section, I will conclude by applying this reading to the aforementioned story, Kristin Roupenian's 'Cat Person'.

## II. Immediate desire

My first task is to explain what Hegel means by desire and why he includes an account of it in this text. Hegel's introduction of desire into the *Phenomenology* at the beginning of 'Self-Consciousness', as well as his claim that self-consciousness is 'desire in general', often puzzles readers. It seems to be a far departure from the question with which the book opens: what is real knowledge of that which truly is?<sup>15</sup> This raises a question about what Hegel means by desire such that it can be fitted into the framework of the *Phenomenology* and related to its ostensible task. It also raises a question about how broadly we are to take the category of desire. Is Hegel talking about appetites like hunger, or does Hegel have in mind more elevated desires, for example the desire to understand his *Phenomenology*?

Notice that Hegel is taking for granted that desire is essentially bound to an object. Desire for him is not a psychological state that seeks relief by any means whatsoever, but a world-directed attitude that seeks satisfaction through an object. This would make desire without an object inconceivable, and what counts as satisfying a desire is attaining the object at which desire is directed. Notice also that desire can appear in two different variations, for I can desire something, or I can have a desire for something. The first captures a direct desire, *I want that*. Here the wanting is understood as a simple and consuming compulsion, and its object a sensuous individual, for instance, a piece of food. Hegel's chapter on desire analyses what he calls 'immediate desire', which has a determinate object, a living organism. But a desire can also be less direct, and farther removed from a compulsion, when what you desire is an abstract object or a state of affairs. You can have a desire for love, a desire for knowledge, or a desire for justice. All fall under Hegel's heading of 'desire in general'. Because Hegel introduces desire in the context of a chapter on self-consciousness, he is also thinking of desire as aiming at *self*-satisfaction, which makes desire reflexive.<sup>16</sup>

To pursue a desire is to be acting in the service of a desire conceived as one's own, hence under a specific self-conception. This formal definition of desire makes Hegel's category broad enough to encompass a wide range of desires, from animal appetites to cerebral aspirations. In each of these cases, a subject seeks to find self-satisfaction by means of an objective intervention, irrespective of how its object is conceived.

In sum, we can say that desire in general is for Hegel a two-term relation. For a relation of desire to obtain, two elements must be present—a subject (of desire) and an object (of desire). This makes it structurally akin to the relation of knowledge, which for Hegel also involves two terms, a subject (of knowledge) and an object (of knowledge). The important difference consists in the nature of this relation. Desire is indeed a mode of activity whose aim is to satisfy the subject by interceding in its object, not letting it remain as it is. This means that Hegel is thinking of desire as a practical comportment or an active intervention, which is sometimes described as a different 'direction of fit' from that of belief: in the case of desire, the pressure is on its object to change in order to fit the desire, rather than the inverse pressure on the subjective attitude to adjust to the way things objectively are. But attention to differences between the aims of knowing and of desiring can obscure a significant feature of desire in general, namely, that Hegel is thinking of desire as a mode of *investigation*. In the context of the *Phenomenology*, desire enters the account precisely because it is in pursuit of knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

I think that Hegel would even say that this aspiration to know is integral to the object-directed structure of desire as such. Given how Hegel characterizes desire in this context, we can ascribe to him the view that self-conscious desire is always also (at least implicitly) a desire for knowledge, irrespective of its proximate end. This feature of desire raises the bar for what is going to count as its satisfaction: if any self-conscious desire is always also a desire for knowledge, then no desire can be fully satisfied unless I am also learning something in its wake. One side of desire's investigation is motivated by a desire for self-knowledge. This is the side that interpreters tend to stress, namely, that when I am acting for the sake of desire's satisfaction, I am seeking objective confirmation of my self-conception, hence knowledge that I really am as I take myself to be. But this side cannot be severed from the other side of desire's investigation, namely, that when I am seeking to satisfy myself through, say, eating, I am simultaneously exploring domains of the objective world—my natural or cultural milieu, what foodstuffs they contain—and advancing my knowledge of them. To reiterate, this follows for Hegel from the object-directed structure of desire itself: to want to eat is also to want to *grasp* (in both senses of the term) what food is and to want to comprehend the contexts of its acquisition.

What makes Hegel's discussion initially puzzling is that he describes immediate desire as destructive:

Certain of the nothingness of this other, [self-consciousness] explicitly affirms that this nothingness is for it the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner. (*PbG*: ¶174)

If immediate desire is destructive, how can an immediately desiring self coherently pursue both aims at once—to satisfy myself and to know an object? Would desire so conceived not find satisfaction only by doing away with the very thing it needs in order to know, namely, the presence of an object? And would this not be a performative contradiction, to want to know something by destroying it, hence eliminating the object that makes my knowledge possible? But there is a danger of reading Hegel's language of destruction too literally, as if desire's target is the object's very existence. What desire wants to destroy is not the object *per se*, but the object's seeming independence, its elusiveness. And to want to destroy an object's independence is to want to assimilate it by rendering it transparent, thereby eliminating it as something that is yet to become known. From a practical perspective, desire's destructive impulse is a form of acquisitiveness or avarice, to make the object 'mine'. But this destructive impulse is placed in the service of knowledge, for it is simultaneously an effort to bring the object within my own cognitive 'reach'.

In order to flesh out this framework of immediate desire, it need not be the case that I want literally *everything*, that I want to acquire whatever object I encounter in the world. Even immediate desire can be discriminate, limited to a certain range of objects. But the perspective Hegel associates with immediate desire brings with it an impoverished worldview inflected by my pursuit of satisfaction. To pursue satisfaction is to regard whatever object one encounters from an exhaustively self-centred point of view. In its broadest connotation, desire refers to a manner of engagement that treats objects in general as vehicles, instruments, externally useful items, and that seeks knowledge of them solely under this guise. In the framework of desire, to be an object is to be an *occasion* or *opportunity* for desire's self-satisfaction, however this object is ultimately related to desire's immediate end. This is what Hegel means when he claims that for desire an object just is a 'negative', namely, a hurdle to be surpassed for satisfaction's sake.

As I stressed, desire in its immediate form has a specific conception of an object, a conception according to which an object is a living individual. Hegel notes that living individuals exhibit a kind of independence, because they are

embodiments of life, which is a ‘reflection into itself’. But it is also significant to the framework of immediate desire that this independence be different in kind from that exhibited by self-consciousness, which is a self-relation with a ‘for-itself’ structure. For Hegel this establishes a fundamental asymmetry between what it is to be an object of desire and to be a subject of desire, which can be spelled out in different ways. It can mean, for instance, that the subject, unlike the object, harbours a self-conception, taking itself to be something or other. But it can also mean that the subject determines the object as an object of knowledge. As a merely living being, the object can prove unwieldy in all sorts of ways, but it cannot resist how it is conceived, for as an object of knowledge, it is at a subject’s interpretive mercy. This asymmetry is crucial to the framework to which immediate desire is beholden and which immediate desire’s experience is putting into question.

### III. Experience

My next task is to delineate Hegel’s distinct concept of experience. It is widely known that Hegel has a concept of experience idiosyncratic to his project in the *Phenomenology*. Here I will flag only four features relevant for our purposes. First, Hegel thinks that you have an experience in his sense only when you encounter something unlike that which you expected to find. He captures this through talk of encountering a *new* object, one that challenges what you previously took to be true of the world. This makes experience a function of expectations, made against standing assumptions about what sorts of objects the world contains. It also means that every experience is going to be in a certain sense a *bad* experience, even if what you learn advances your knowledge. If experience thwarts expectations in the process of exceeding them, it will involve a negative moment of frustration and disappointment. It might even be *felt* to be frustrating or disappointing, which is why Hegel famously calls it a ‘path of despair’. But there could also be cases in which one is pleased to have one’s assumptions overturned. I want to capture this ‘negative’ dimension of experience more generally as its moment of surprise, welcome or unwelcome.

Second, Hegel thinks that experience requires preparation, which means that not just any experience will be available for the making at every moment in time. What is distinctive about Hegel’s concept is that he thinks this preparation comes by way of dominant conceptual frameworks, what Hegel in the *Phenomenology* identifies as ‘shapes’ of consciousness that circumscribe what can appear as an object in the first place. It is such frameworks that provide the needed preparation because they furnish resources with which to interpret your



experience. But the experiences of interest to Hegel bear a tenuous relationship to these frameworks, for they both presuppose and surpass them. These experiences disclose an object that requires the development of new interpretive resources not yet available within the constraints of a given framework. This means that frameworks prepare the experiencing subject for their own overcoming.

Third, Hegel thinks that you can only experience that which you yourself are. While this does not mean that you can only experience yourself (rather than something else), it does mean that you can only experience those things that bear a structural likeness to you in your capacity as a subject of knowledge. To provide an example from the *Phenomenology*: it is because you yourself are living that you are able to 'discover' life and experience it as manifest in living organisms other than yourself. What justifies this constraint is partly Hegel's positive account of real knowledge, for the *Phenomenology* brings into gradual relief that real knowledge is only achieved through an isomorphism between the subject and object of knowledge. But this constraint is also partly justified by the double nature of the experiential process, that it is both a self-discovery and a discovery of an object at one and the same time. Your self-conception as a living being is not developed independently of your conception of your object as 'another life', for it is through your experience of living organisms that you come to conceive of yourself as living, and it is through your capacity to conceive of yourself as living that you discover life in an object other than yourself.

Fourth, experience is both innovative and repetitive. It introduces innovations on the level of conceptual frameworks, pushing consciousness to fashion new interpretive resources in order to account for the surprising objects it encounters. But experience is also repetitive, requiring perpetual renewal. The way that Hegel captures this latter dimension is by emphasizing that consciousness 'forgets' what it has learned, requiring a process of recollection that is the *Phenomenology* itself. But this problem of renewal reappears at many of the junctures of this process, which suggests that the cycle of forgetting and remembering is ceaseless throughout the *Phenomenology*. To return to our example, I must encounter 'life' again and again in order to maintain my grip on it as something genuinely real. Although the term 'experience' is reserved for the moment of discovery, it does not have to be a discovery that I am making for the very first time. It could also be a re-discovery of something I have encountered before, but whose lesson I am only now fully absorbing.

Given the idiosyncrasy of Hegel's concept of experience, there is a strong temptation to think that it could not be legitimately applied to experiences made in everyday contexts, that Hegel is talking about experiences in the realm of conceptual thinking, maybe experiences in the controlled 'scientific' setting of the *Phenomenology* itself.<sup>18</sup> Hegel invites this impression when he distinguishes the

philosophical meaning of experience from experience in the ordinary sense of the term. He tells us that ordinary experiences are made at the hands of an object that one encounters contingently and externally, whereas philosophical experiences are self-inflicted, produced through the internal operation of consciousness itself (*PbG*: ¶¶86–87). On my reading, this amounts to a difference in perspective. An experience can be regarded as ordinary if it is considered in its contingent context, in which what is discovered is an external object that one was not expecting to find. The very same experience can (in some cases) be regarded as philosophical, if it is considered as part of a broader learning process, in which the limits of dominant frameworks are becoming exposed. Although not every experience that takes place in everyday life will lend itself to a philosophical interpretation, Hegel's experiential process is indebted to the reservoir of ordinary experiences as the source material from which it draws.

#### IV. Desire as erotic

As a last piece of stage-setting, let us consider what speaks for and what against taking erotic desire as an illustration of the experiential process Hegel is outlining, specifically the experience that Hegel thinks immediate desire is making. This interpretive move may strike some readers as illegitimate, since the subject of desire appears to be initially engaged with something that is merely living, which suggests that he has in mind a plant or animal, whatever can sate an appetite. Erotic desire seems too complex by comparison, since erotic desire presupposes that what you desire is already conceptualized as another person, someone who is not reducible to a living organism.<sup>19</sup> This has led to the strong impression that we only arrive at the needed intersubjectivity at the end of this chapter, in the wake of our realization that self-consciousness can only find satisfaction in another self-consciousness.

What I want to show is that erotic desire provides especially useful source material for this chapter because erotic desire combines two desiderata. First, in its sexual form it exemplifies the immediacy of desire, a kind of hunger, the *I want that* structure. It is significant that what one wants is another body, a living creature, even if this body is conceptualized as the body of a person and not, say, of a non-human animal. But erotic desire is also a desire for a person, a desire that can only be satisfied through another subject of desire. Again, we should refrain from thinking of the desire in question in purely physiological terms. What I am seeking is not a sensation of pleasure, but interaction with an independent object. This makes the object of erotic desire significantly different from the object of a simple appetite, such as a piece of food. It is the fact that erotic desire combines

these two desiderata that helps explain the transition to the concluding insight that *self-consciousness can find its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*. In other words, if what I am experiencing is already 'in truth' a self-consciousness, it is easier to see how it is the discovery of an object of this unexpected kind that is going to compel me to revise my background assumptions about the constitution of the world.

From the ordinary perspective, the experience is made at the hands of an object that I encounter contingently and externally, an unwelcome surprise. This makes the specific experience a matter of happenstance. But Hegel's paragraph describes such an experience not as it appears to the consciousness making it first-hand but reconstructed from a philosophical perspective. In the case of immediate desire, I did not just have the bad luck of stumbling upon an object that is unwieldy in unfamiliar ways. In fact, I needed such an object in order to discover that my assumptions about the world were impoverished. Most importantly, my framework lacked the resources to even conceive of myself as objectively manifest, as really present in it, as a subject of desire. This means that I am compelled to alter my conception of the object in order to grasp what I myself am. Again, Hegel's experiential process is double-sided, for I can only learn what I am by means of an object that bears a structural likeness to myself.

My approach here is not without precedent. Neuhouser (2009), for example, has argued that Hegel's account can include erotic desire if we expand our understanding of 'negation' beyond the literal consumption implied by an analogy with hunger. His example is the compulsive seducer, whose attitude 'parallels desire's insofar as he attempts to prove his elevated status in relation to an other that counts for him, roughly, as a thing' (Neuhouser 2009: 44).<sup>20</sup> The difference is that the seducer does so, not by literally eating the other, but by ruining the other's 'honour', thereby losing interest in this particular individual and moving on to the next opportunity for seduction. Neuhouser describes this as a process of objectification. As he puts it, 'One obvious disanalogy is that the seducer's object is another person, not a mere living thing. But the analogy remains enlightening insofar as the seducer in effect regards his object as a thing, as something that imposes no constraints on his own desire' (Neuhouser 2009: 53, n. 2). This objectification seems to be responsible for making compulsive seduction so insatiable, since the other person is not conceived in such a way that they could sustain erotic interest.

There are, however, grounds for suspecting that it is only once we move beyond desire in its immediate form that we get the elements needed in order to capture erotic desire in its full complexity. Here I have in mind Kojève's suggestion that desire is transformed from animal appetite into distinctly human desire in the course of Hegel's argument. Kojève describes this new structure as a 'desire for another desire', which is different from a desire for an object that

need not have desires of its own, or whose desires are irrelevant to my own. For example, someone's desire might be simply to *be* desired, to be on its receiving end. Desire can also be highly attuned to what is considered to be desirable in a social milieu, which sorts of bodies are taken to be sexually attractive by one's peers. This indicates a further sense in which desire becomes mediated by an awareness of other desire.

Butler even notes that the ensuing life and death struggle in Hegel's *Phenomenology* can be described in erotic terms. They call this struggle an 'anti-corporeal erotic which endeavors to prove in vain that the body is the ultimate limit to freedom rather than its necessary ground and mediation' (Butler 2012: 52). According to Butler, this anti-corporeal erotic persists in the relationship between the lord and the bondsman, both sides of which are driven by a 'death-bent desire' and constitute 'configurations of death in life' (Butler 2012: 54). Irrespective of their specific description of this interaction, it is surely not far-fetched to detect erotic tenors in the dynamic of domination and submission between the lord and the bondsman. These lines of interpretation lend support for reading even the earlier chapter on desire through the lens of erotic desire, despite the fact that we get a more satisfying account of erotic desire only at the end of this experiential process.<sup>21</sup>

As I mentioned, Hegel's experiential process depends on ordinary experiences as its source material. In this context, I think that there are two kinds of sexual experiences on which Hegel could be drawing. According to the first version, I am a compulsive seducer who keeps pursuing an endless string of sexual conquests, growing bored with the person in question as soon as I have succeeded in seducing them. What would make this an experience in Hegel's sense would be a dawning realization that such pursuit is ultimately doomed, because it requires a ceaseless search for new partners. While this version follows Hegel's own presentation more closely, I think that a different sexual experience is just as fitting to his account. According to this second version, I am a compulsive seducer who encounters someone displaying a form of resistance I did not come to expect. They exhibit competing desires, perhaps in the form of a desire to reject me. In this way I discover that I am confronted with an object that mirrors my own relation to it. I am as much an object of desire (or repulsion) for my object of desire as it is an object of desire for me.<sup>22</sup>

## V. Paragraph 175

I now turn to paragraph 175, which I cite in full:

In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the

self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of the relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of Desire; and through this experience self-consciousness has itself realized this truth. But at the same time it is no less absolutely for itself, and it is so only by superseding the object; and it must experience its satisfaction, for it is the truth. On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is in itself the negative, and must be for the other what it is. Since the object is in its own self negation, and in being so is at the same time independent, it is consciousness. In the sphere of Life, which is the object of Desire, negation is present either in an other, viz. in Desire, or as the determinateness opposed to another indifferent form, or as the inorganic universal nature of Life. But this universal independent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as self-consciousness. Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness. (*PbG*: ¶175)

Recall that the framework of immediate desire is committed to an asymmetry between what it is to be a subject of desire and what it is to be an object of desire. According to this framework, an object is at the subject's interpretive mercy, exhausted by the subject's grasp of it, and the subject seeks the 'negation' of its object (to satisfy oneself by its means) and takes its object to be a 'negative' (an opportunity for such satisfaction). So, my initial desire seems to me to be for an object that yields to me, that conforms to my expectations, hence confirming my self-sufficiency. What I encounter, however, is an object that resists my efforts and so appears uncooperative, i.e. an 'independent' object.

The argument in this paragraph is going to turn on the term 'satisfaction', for Hegel emphasizes that the experience is made through the satisfaction of desire, not its dissatisfaction. In other words, for this experience to become possible, it must be the case that I get what I wanted under the description under which I wanted it; only then can I discover the limits of my pursuit and hence of the framework under which I was operating. But what exactly does it mean

to satisfy a desire? Minimally, it is going to mean realizing the object I set out to pursue, so grasping the object as I preliminarily conceived of it. As I already stressed, it also means engaging with something that can simultaneously satisfy my desire *for knowledge*. In other words, to satisfy a desire is not simply a matter of getting what I explicitly wanted, but also a matter of learning something, both about myself and my object. This is what it would mean for immediate desire to achieve full satisfaction.

As Hegel puts it, the experience I make is that the object of my desire is ‘independent’. Although the first line of the paragraph is meant to summarize the whole experience, the relevant notion of independence is initially ambiguous. It can be read as a confirmation of the assumption that immediate desire is making about its object, because it can be read as an interpretation of what it is to serve as a ‘negative’, i.e. a hurdle. Prior to this experience, I may have assumed that I would have preferred an object that immediately yields to me, but it turns out that only an independent object is capable of yielding satisfaction. In other words, the appearance of independence is already built into the conception of objectivity under consideration, which means that I was *in fact* seeking an object that resists me, even if it is the case that I was not yet aware of this.

My desire for an object that appears to be independent is the reason that Hegel makes the claim that the self-certainty that desire yields is conditioned by the object. It is only because the object at first resists my effort to find satisfaction by its means that I gain self-certainty as a desiring subject through its conquest. At this point I have discovered only that my object must be independent, that this is a requirement of my conception of objectivity. I am not yet interested in why it is that it is resisting me, whether its refusal is deliberate or incidental, whether it attests to an independent desire or not. Since the independent object is seen as a mere challenge to be surpassed, I am seemingly satisfied when I do surpass it, when I vanquish an object of desire that at first rebuffs me.

An example that comes from Angel’s own book is the paradigmatic ‘pickup artist’ who recommends interpreting the refusal of women as an opportunity for seduction. This seduction is believed to be all the sweeter when it is preceded by another’s opposition. What such a person wants is someone who is ‘hard to get’, for it is the act of seduction that provides evidence of their own agency and power. But the pickup artist also recommends interpreting this refusal as a superficial performance, an act of *playing* hard to get. To someone persuaded by such a framework, the sheer fact that I come upon a person who rejects my advances is not yet a reason for me to challenge my assumptions about myself or my object. In Hegel’s terms, I would still be operating under the same expectations about what it is that would provide me with satisfaction.

In order to discover the limits of my framework, I have to succeed in getting what I want under the description under which I wanted it and learn through experience that this satisfaction is actually dissatisfying. What I am discovering is something that is essential to the structure of desire, that to desire is to relate to something that you do not *yet* grasp, and hence to depend on this something that is not *yet* 'yours'. To be in a desiring state is to be in a state of lack, of insufficiency. Prior to experiencing satisfaction, I expected that acquiring an independent object would overcome my dependence on it. But as soon as my desire is satisfied, the need for an object that is independent of me re-emerges.

Satisfaction is revealed to be dissatisfying because it entangles the subject in an endless quest, replicating desire for an object over and over again. To put this differently, immediate desire is revealed to have the structure of what Hegel calls 'bad infinity', which has negative connotations. A bad form of infinity indicates a process whose goal is in principle unrealizable. It also indicates that attempting to reach this goal is a matter of engaging in mechanical repetition. A subject of desire is compelled to perform the very same act of seduction repeatedly. As soon as I am satisfied, I become dissatisfied, and hence thrown back onto a search for the next apparently independent object. In this way, satisfaction of immediate desire teaches that immediate desire cannot be satisfied, because it is incapable of fulfilment. This follows from the essential structure of immediate desire, not from any contingent facts about it.

One way to think of this is to say that to be a subject of desire is to pass through a condition of dependence, and to realize this is to acknowledge a moment of vulnerability to another, a vulnerability that is repeatedly disclosed, even if only to be repeatedly surpassed. The reason that this experience is a genuinely new discovery is that it sits uncomfortably with my self-conception as a subject of desire that is setting the terms for any objective engagement. You might even suspect that it is this discomfort that moves you to act in ways that will allow you to exit this state as quickly as possible. As a subject of desire, I am supposed to dictate what is and how it is knowable. But being in a state of desire is being at the mercy of an object that has the power to reject you, thereby encountering you on its own terms. And it is moreover only in virtue of my vulnerability to another's perspective on me that satisfaction is to be found.

When Hegel claims that we have at this point realized a 'truth', I take this to be a truth about the object of desire, and not merely a truth about myself as its subject. In other words, I am learning through experience that my object, *as* an object of desire, is ever-receding, always escaping my grasp, even if I succeed in taking hold of some thing or other. Since Hegel has identified another life as the object of immediate desire, he puts this point in the following way: while I can consume living organisms as discrete individuals, life itself remains inexhaustible by me. It is the realization of this truth that makes clear the need for a different

kind of object, in other words, for a transformed conception of what an object is such that it does not in principle remain beyond reach. Hegel's process thus concludes with a transformed understanding of both desire's object and of the satisfaction to be achieved by its means. The object of desire is now conceived as a self-negating entity, hence as another self-consciousness. His talk of self-negation suggests submission, which gets us into the life-and-death struggle and dynamic between the lord and the bondsman.

Because self-negation is only possible for someone who is self-related in the same way I am, and so not merely a living organism, finding satisfaction is now acknowledged to require interaction with other subject of desire. The subsequent sentences are meant to clarify why it is that this object cannot be merely a living organism but must be another self-consciousness. Hegel's point is not just that living organisms fall short of the right kind of self-relation; it is also that I can only comprehend what I myself am by admitting the existence of other individuals of the same genus as myself, so other self-conscious beings. In sum, I can only discover myself as a subject of desire if what I desire is another self, a being that resembles my own constitution. Experience for Hegel results in the realization that to grasp myself as a subject requires grasping my object as another subject. This experience reveals the isomorphism between subject and object, for to be an object of desire is also to be a subject of desire, and to be a subject of desire is to be the object of another's desire. Although this is far from the end of Hegel's story, the worldview is now enriched to include other self-conscious subjects.

In sum, we started with an experience of satisfaction that is made through an object's independence, and it is by means of this satisfaction that an unexpected source of frustration rears its head—the object so conceived turns out to be forever elusive—which ushers in a transformed conception of the object. But it does not mean that I have been dealing with merely living individuals so far and must now go looking for a being like me, another self-consciousness. Rather, what Hegel is tracking is a transformation in the way that the object's experienced independence is interpreted, which suggests that I could have been already engaging with an object that is 'in truth' much more complex than I initially admitted to myself. I can interpret resistance as a challenge to be overcome, and the object's independence as a mere hurdle. Or I can interpret this resistance as evidence of someone else's sense of their own boundaries, as an expression of what it is that they desire on their own terms. According to Hegel's argument, these are not two equally compelling alternatives. In fact, an effort to find satisfaction of the first variety will lead to the realization that true satisfaction becomes possible only when the second is pursued.



There are powerful ethical reasons to abandon the worldview associated with immediate desire, which is impoverished in harmful ways. What Hegel shows is that as an immediately desiring self, I also have powerful epistemic reasons to abandon this framework, for it lacks the resources to conceive of myself as objectively manifest and so to come to know what I am. I am compelled to alter my conception of the object of my desire and understand it to be like myself (a subject of desire) in order to be in a position to grasp what I myself (as a subject of desire) am. The self-knowledge I am pursuing in the context of the *Phenomenology* as well as in other contexts becomes possible only when the object of my desire turns out to be and is understood to be another subject.

## VI. Cat Person

The short story 'Cat Person', which tells of a sexual encounter replete with frustrations and disappointments, resonates with the outline of Hegel's abstract analysis. In order for such an encounter to count as an experience in Hegel's sense, it has to be possible to characterize it as a learning process.<sup>23</sup> This, however, does not mean that either of the people involved must as a matter of fact learn. Hegel often underscores the fact that consciousness in its function as the protagonist in the *Phenomenology* exhibits a tendency toward inertia, preferring to remain stuck inside frameworks even once they have proven untenable (*PbG*: ¶80). So, the likelihood that Margot and Robert will go on to repeat versions of this encounter, presumably with other people, does not mean that there was not a truth about the nature of erotic desire to be learned from it.

Take for example Margot's description of Robert's view of her, at least as she imagines it to be. Up to this point, Margot has felt powerless to put a halt to a process that she thinks she has set into motion by agreeing to go on a date with him. Although Margot does not desire Robert, is even repulsed by him physically, she does find what she pictures as his desire for her to be sufficiently enticing to go back to his place: 'By her third beer, she was thinking about what it would be like to have sex with Robert. Probably it would be like that bad kiss, clumsy and excessive, but imagining how excited he would be, how hungry and eager to impress her, she felt a twinge of desire pluck at her belly, as distinct and painful as the snap of an elastic band against her skin' (Roupenian 2019: 85). She is imagining herself as the object of his desire, a private fantasy she is indulging in his presence.<sup>24</sup>

Once they arrive at his apartment, she thinks it too late for her to reject him, likening it to sending back food she had ordered in a restaurant, which she has

been socialized to avoid doing. But her expectations of his response to her are not completely off the mark, for she notes that when she undressed in his presence, ‘He looked stunned and stupid with pleasure, like a milk-drunk baby, and she thought that maybe this was what she loved most about sex—a guy revealed like that’ (Roupenian 2019: 89). She relishes this moment of revelation, presumably because it shifts power, however fleetingly, into her hands. In wanting her, he becomes dependent on her. This revelation also stands in contrast with his self-presentation as the one in control of the situation, a situation she can at most accept or refuse.

True to immediate desire’s form, Robert quickly attempts to disguise his dependence by proceeding to handle her body through mechanical motions: ‘During sex, he moved her through a series of positions with brusque efficiency, flipping her over, pushing her around, and she felt like a doll again [...] a doll made of rubber, flexible and resilient, a prop for the movie that was playing in his head’ (Roupenian 2019: 91). She suspects him of enacting a private fantasy, one that casts her as a prop. Here she is rendered powerless—regarded and treated as an instrument for servicing his pleasure. What makes this behaviour especially objectifying is Robert’s total indifference to how she is responding to him, whether he is also satisfying her desire in turn.

Margot’s reaction to the way she is being treated is to think to herself: ‘This is the worst life decision I have ever made! And she marveled at herself for a while, at the mystery of this person who’d just done this bizarre, inexplicable thing’ (Roupenian 2019: 92). So, her inner life, which she withholds in the moment, is starkly at odds with how she is being seen by Robert. She is marvelling at herself, struck by her own mysteriousness, even though Robert is clearly not. From his perspective, she is fully present as this body available to him. Several days later, however, Robert becomes confronted by her resistance to him when he receives the message, ‘Hi i’m not interested in you stop textng me’, which attests to her ability to redirect her interest. But the pattern of desire is re-enacted when Robert shows up at a bar that he suspects she frequents, indicating that he is not over her. It is another revelation of dependence on his part, which Robert tries to conceal through verbal aggression: after sending several pleading messages, he calls her a ‘whore’.

At the time the story went viral, legions of women identified with Margot because they took her to be faultless, someone who had the familiar misfortune of meeting a hostile man.<sup>25</sup> While I think that the story hints at numerous social pressures that made it especially difficult for a young woman in Margot’s position to exit this unwanted situation, it seems to me that Margot can also be described as subject to immediate desire’s limitations. Even when Margot caters to Robert’s desires, she is responding to what she believes Robert to find

desirable about her. She ascribes to him a vision which she finds especially flattering and to which she is ultimately drawn. She likes seeing herself through his eyes. In a revealing moment, she notes, 'As they kissed, she found herself carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego that she could hardly admit even to herself that she was having it. Look at this beautiful girl, she imagined him thinking' (Roupenian 2019: 89). This suggests that Margot is inhabiting the perspective of immediate desire as well, in her case a desire to feed her vanity with Robert's assistance. Hers is also a desire that sets the terms on which the world is encountered.<sup>26</sup>

In this light, Roupenian's story can be read as a painful and frustrating process by which the two characters come to confront each other as subjects of desires, despite the undeniable social asymmetries between them. We can say that Robert is making the experience of Margot as not just a prop in the film running in his head, but as someone capable of turning him down, even if it was difficult for her to do so in the moment. But Margot is likewise making the experience of Robert as someone whose reactions overturn her expectations, a Robert capable of hurtling a verbally abusive word at her, and hence a Robert that is no longer just a figment of an imagination in which her ego reigns supreme.<sup>27</sup> Iris Murdoch once said about love that it is 'the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real' (Murdoch 1959: 51). It seems to me that something similar could be said about sex. This experience of erotic desire resonates with many ordinary lessons that may need to be repeatedly re-learned.

I have argued that Hegel's outline of immediate desire's unfolding can offer insight into the object of erotic exploration, into that which the pursuit of sexual satisfaction promises to disclose. We are now in a position to appreciate that this object is irreducible to one's personal preferences but must include the reality of oneself and other people as on the one hand vulnerable and revealed, on the other hand independent and resistant, beings that are not adequately conceptualized as mere opportunities for gratification. While I think that Hegel's insight accords with Angel's initial idea, she seems to have in mind a process of discovery that is hopefully not going to be painful and frustrating along the lines I have presented. Angel is gesturing toward a form of erotic exploration that even when it contains disappointments, requires an objective context of safety for adventure, abandon, and release, and so can begin only once the reality of other people is a settled matter, and not an experience still lying in wait. It is then that we may have arrived at that 'tomorrow' when—to return to her formulation—sex will be good again.<sup>28</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Her title is borrowed from Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

<sup>2</sup> There is a debate in feminist philosophy as to whether there is more to 'bad sex' than can be captured by the framework of consent. For several recent samples, see Alcoff (2018), Fischel (2019), Srinivasan (2021) and Garcia (2023). The ethical questions surrounding consent will not be the topic of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> First published in the New Yorker on 11 December 2017 and criticized in Nowicki's "'Cat Person" and Me', in which she describes the process of finding out that details from her life served as the basis for this story: (<https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/cat-person-kristen-roupenian-viral-story-about-me.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Margot claims that her reluctance to refuse him is not borne from fear of physical violence, though it could have been motivated by fear of other forms of punishment, like being shamed or verbally abused.

<sup>5</sup> An account of Hegel's conception of this drive would have to include the *Philosophy of Nature*, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> For an example of this argument, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/opinion/aziz-ansari-babe-sexual-harassment.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Consider the phrase 'to know someone in the Biblical sense': 'And Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain' (Genesis 4:1).

<sup>8</sup> Abbreviations used:

*PbG* = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)/*Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952).

*LHP* = Hegel, *Lectures of the History of Philosophy: Plato and the Platonists*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. Simson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

*Republic* = Plato, 'Republic' in *Completed Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett).

<sup>9</sup> For other accounts of erotic love that draw on Hegelian resources, see Katz (2020) and Gregoratto (2025).

<sup>10</sup> Hegel mentions *Eros* in his *Lectures of the History of Philosophy* in connection with Plato, noting that in the *Phaedo* 'Eros' functions as a 'powerful, predominating aspiration toward the Idea' (*LHP*: 36).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Pippin (2014) provides an influential reading of desire that does not leave room for an erotic interpretation. Although Brandom (2007) defines desire as an 'erotic awareness', he means by this a classification of objects as either food or non-food, a classification of which even non-human animals are capable.

<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum (1995) argues that some forms of objectification are a 'wonderful' part of sexual life. See also Anderson and Ward (2022).

<sup>13</sup> This aspect of desire in Hegel's *Phenomenology* is especially well captured by the title of Butler (2012).

<sup>14</sup> Even fully satisfying sexual encounters will be limited from the perspective of the *Phenomenology*'s 'expedition'; while sex can teach us a lot about the contours of reality, it can only teach so much.

<sup>15</sup> As Neuhouser observes, 'Whereas in the previous chapter consciousness's goal was to know its object – an object it took to be distinct from and independent of itself – self-consciousness's aim seems fundamentally different: it seeks to "satisfy itself" and to do so through activity that transforms, rather than merely knows, its world' (Neuhouser 2009: 37).

<sup>16</sup> As Butler puts it, 'desire is always for something other which, in turn, is always a desire for a more expanded version of the subject' (Butler 2012: 34).

<sup>17</sup> Hegel argues that desire discloses something that is true of all knowledge acquisition, that pursuing knowledge is proactive, conative and transformative process. This suggests that desire represents an improved understanding of what it is to be a subject of knowledge.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of experience in this 'scientific' setting, see Emundts 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Butler 1976 argues that the steps in Hegel's *Phenomenology* map onto stages of individual sexual development. Even Butler, who reads Hegel through an explicitly Freudian lens, claims that desire is "presocial" (512) and corresponds to a stage of psychosexual development during which the child bears a "cannibalistic" relation to anything other (Butler 1976: 511).

<sup>20</sup> Kierkegaard's figure of the seducer fits this description: 'For him individuals were nothing but incitement; he cast them off as a tree sheds its leaves – he became young again, the leaves withered' (Kierkegaard 2006: 10). But an even better example is Beauvoir's discussion of Don Juan: 'every Don Juan is confronted with Elviras. Every undertaking unfolds in a human world and affects men' (Beauvoir 1948: 60).

<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that it will be a fully satisfying account of at that point. The lord and bondsman represent a highly dysfunctional dyad and are hardly the end point of Hegel's learning process.

<sup>22</sup> As I have described the two experiences, you might suspect that I am taking for granted a male perspective, since it is usually men who are socially encouraged to pursue women considered 'hard to get'. But it seems to me that we can offer a broader interpretation of such an experiential process. As I will go on to suggest, there are multiple perspectives that can be said to exemplify it, so the experience in question need not be limited to men. It is also worth noting that Hegel himself espoused highly sexist views, which he presents in the *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere. According to these views, men and women have fundamentally different cognitive capacities. Without wanting to deny that such sexist views are a part of Hegel's official position, it is not obvious to me that the cognitive differences he ascribes to men and women have a direct bearing on the learning process I am presenting here.

<sup>23</sup> Nelson also describes sexual encounters as "sites of learning" (Nelson 2021: 86) and a "wandering into the woods" (Nelson 2021: 78).

<sup>24</sup> Lopes 2021 provides a reading of “Cat Person” that is informed by Beauvoir’s analysis of the ‘narcissist’, who deals with her unfreedom under patriarchy by making herself into her own project. Lopes is arguing that Margot represents a contemporary version of this type, and that Robert is its counterpart, the ‘vain man’. This suggests that while both are self-absorbed, their self-absorption takes different, gendered forms.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of these pop-feminist responses, see Lopes 2021: 703–707.

<sup>26</sup> Roupenian gave an interview shortly after the story appeared, in which she claims that it is about the interpretive challenges involved in context-less dating. When we don’t have parameters for reading someone, ‘[w]e decide that it means something that a person likes cats instead of dogs, or has a certain kind of artsy tattoo, or can land a good joke in a text.’ What these details mean is entirely at Margot’s discretion. Roupenian adds, ‘Margot, and the reader, can project practically anything onto Robert, because there’s so little there.’ (<https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/fiction-this-week-kristen-roupenian-2017-12-11>).

<sup>27</sup> This reading does not require that we accept Roupenian’s own interpretation of the ending, according to which it is the ‘point at which [Margot] receives unequivocal evidence about the kind of person [Robert] is’ (ibid).

<sup>28</sup> Many thanks in particular to Olivia Bailey, Emily Bogin, Katie Gasdaglis, Federica Gregoratto, Liz Harmer, Oksana Maksymchuk, Karen Ng and Francey Russell for comments, suggestions or encouragement, and to the participants in the Workshop on Late Modern Philosophy at Boston University, the conference on First Nature in Social Philosophy at Columbia University, and the *Graduiertenkolleg* in Normativity, Critique, and Change at the Free University in Berlin for stimulating discussions.

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