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How Digital Technology Shapes Self-Consciousness in Work Relationships? Reference to Hegel

Albena Neschen¹ 

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Abstract

Up to now, there is a big debate, about what self-consciousness is, what inhibits it, and how this is related to work. By referring to classical theories of mind by Hegel this paper advances the thesis of an apparent congruence of self-consciousness and work as a developmental process in social relationships. This paper aims to open up a wider philosophical horizon for the criticism of current digitalization and the increasing variety of new flexible forms of work design. For example, the working conditions on large digital platforms for taxi drivers tend to inhibit the development of worker's self-consciousness for two reasons: Firstly, workers on digital platforms are not able to further develop digital tools through their work and this inhibits their intellectual creativity and secondly, the developmental process of the self-consciousness remains restricted because of the asymmetrical recognition, which only obtains by virtue of a process of recognizing and being recognized by others. Creative work and recognition are important for the development of consciousness as self-reflection in digital business, in which organizations operate and people work.

Keywords Digital tools for work · Recognition · Hegel's master-servant-dialectic · Algorithmic management · Digital platforms · Taxi drivers

Introduction

Current digitalization and automation are fundamentally reshaping the way we work. Consider for example the work of taxi drivers: They do not necessarily need to go to common taxi stands anymore; rather they receive the driving orders – the gigs – from a digital platform (such as UBER or mytaxi) via smartphone. An experienced taxi entrepreneur describes in an interview how uncoordinated the taxi business was without the digital tools that are common today:

Because in the past (...) if you were unlucky, there were already ten taxis there – and you waited endlessly. At another stop there was none at the same time, there you would have been needed. Well, and now you can see everything [points to the app

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in the smartphone]: there are fewer, then I'm going there now, or here are so many taxis. (Pakusch et al. 2021).

Digital tools and new forms of work on labor platforms use algorithms to efficiently match taxi drivers with clients and customers. Ratings, client or customer reviews, workers' skill levels, and cancellation or acceptance of work, are some of the key elements of this algorithmic matching. Algorithms also monitor, track and evaluate taxi drivers, and thereby organize their work processes very efficiently. The opportunities for efficiency provided by digital tools and platforms are accompanied by social challenges. For example, taxi drivers traditionally used to meet at typical waiting points such as taxi ranks at train stations or tram stops, while waiting for the next passengers. As drivers are increasingly using digital tools, fewer drivers are to be found at the waiting points. They report in an interview:

Nowadays, this social exchange does not take place at all anymore due to the introduction of digital systems, and some of our colleagues can no longer be seen for months. Unfortunately, everything has become anonymous. (Pakusch et al. 2021).

Digital systems and tools are often referred to as “algorithmic management” and criticized because of a lack of transparency and intrinsic power imbalance between workers and operators of digital platforms (Cutolo and Kenney 2021). These developments raise many critical questions, which are in focus here: How can people reflect on their work by not knowing how the working tools function? How do the new digital tools and flexible forms of work on digital platforms shape workers' self-consciousness and social relationships? Digital platforms promise their members independence and self-determination but also tend to hinder social understanding and creativity. Workers' self-reflection is limited, and this inhibits their self-consciousness, as I will argue in this paper. Self-consciousness, our conscious experience of self and world, is the unique human capacity for self-awareness in reflecting environmental factors, including new working conditions and tools. In this sense, work is a consciousness-immanent notion. Self-consciousness is perhaps one of the most puzzling aspects of the current theorizing about the mind (Düsing 1995). Despite the lack of agreement upon a theory of consciousness, there is a widespread consensus that we need to understand both - what self-consciousness is and how it relates to others, in particular, what is in focus here, and how it relates to social interaction in work relationships. In this regard, Hegel's philosophy provides an interesting link between self-consciousness and work. Hegel lived in the time of industrialization in Europe, and his writing reflects its effects on humans. He recognized that the growing economic power changed the lives and self-consciousness of people. Today we are experiencing a similar economization and automation of almost all areas of life, which encourages us to consider the question of orientation about our human self-understanding and self-determination. By following Hegel's theory of mind I will argue that the current automation of digital systems at work can be seen as one of the causes, which inhibits their self-consciousness. In this paper I develop two lines of argumentation: firstly, the self-reflection is limited because they cannot relate to the work and the digital tools used for work, and secondly, the self-consciousness remains underdeveloped because of the inherent power imbalance and asymmetrical recognition.

However, while Hegel's theory of mind provides no answers to current technological and social issues, it offers a wider horizon for their consideration and critics. A deeper understanding of this process enables people to understand better how they associate with others according to their social roles in the organization and society. From this philosophical groundwork, we can start thinking of how to deal with the digital transformation of

work so that its opportunities and core values of modern developments such as independence, self-determination, creativity, and human development are achievable.

Work as Self-Consciousness Immanent Notion in Hegel's Early Jena Writings

The current discussion of self-consciousness is influenced by the arguments of Aristotle in a modern interpretation. Aristotle states in general, that the perception of the senses is self-reflexive. Sensual awareness includes the awareness of the senses themselves. It is not only the color that the person perceives but also the “I” that perceives and sees the color. We attribute the perception of particulars also to the self. Having the sensation or perception means, that “I” am conscious of the sensation as mine. This understanding of self and self-consciousness as self-reflexive subjectivity is shared widely in classical and modern philosophy (Düsing 1995, 1997). But how is this understanding related to human work? Referring to early Hegel in his Jena writings we can reflect on the relationship between self-consciousness and work.

For Hegel, the self refers to itself and perceives itself by perceiving others. Self-consciousness is a reflexive developmental process, which begins as a kind of self-feeling. Thus, we are not born with ready-made selves, but with the potential to come to be conscious (Dahlstrom 2013). In the process of building, self-consciousness engages in abstraction, thus distinguishing the subject from its objects. To identify itself, the thinking self moves between itself and the external things (its counterpart, opposite, non-self—in Hegel's words “Anderssein,” or otherness). The external reality is registered in the self's movement between itself and otherness. External things exist as a form of self-reference and as a way to recognize one's self in otherness (Hegel 1976, Vol. 8, p. 185). The self sees itself reflected in other selves, and indirectly gains knowledge of itself. The human self discovers that the presented content is a self-reflexive relationship. This relationship is called subjectivity. The self recognizes itself as an active part of rational thinking. Truly existing is thus for Hegel the subjective self that recognizes itself. Concerning others and their otherness, the subjective self recognizes itself and returns to itself, attributing its otherness to itself. In other words, it reflects on itself indirectly. This thinking return from the otherness is a kind of self-reflection and constitutes self-consciousness.

The cognitive process of self-consciousness happens gradually. The content, which is introduced to the self, is gradually being enriched by its performance. Hegel characterizes the gradual development of self-consciousness as the process of selfish individuals satisfying their desires. Since the self has nullified external content into its own, it can only make itself the content. In doing so, it differentiates between the moment of universality as an ideal end and the moment of individuality as a performing self. The center, in which these two moments of the self are related, is, according to early Hegel, the drive (Hegel 1976, Vol. 8, p. 202). The drive has two sides: it is firstly the desire that is animalistic and strives only for satisfaction, and secondly, it is the will for a fulfilling existence of the self. Human beings fulfill their drives through work. Accordingly, human work has also two sides: on the one hand, the mere mechanical activity of manipulating nature for the satisfaction of desire, and on the other the satisfaction of the drive for a fulfilled existence of the self. While the first kind of work is a devalued activity, the second represents an activity of the mind.

On the first side, work consists in overcoming animalistic desires. Hegel, therefore, calls work “inhibited desire.” (Hegel 1980, Vol. 9, p. 115). The animal satisfies its hunger immediately; however, the human satisfies his needs, such as those for food and shelter, only after he has changed what nature has provided him with, according to his desires, through work. Work is then a practical awareness, an equilibrium that relates opposites: active humans and passive nature (Hegel 1975, Vol. 6, p. 300). Mechanical work for the mere satisfaction of needs is, in Hegel’s philosophy, a system of mediations with nature: Nature “feeds” and preserves mankind, but mankind loses its direct contact through the mechanical processing of the natural surroundings. To spare himself/herself from an inherent struggle against nature, he/she turns the laws and forces of nature against itself and to his/her advantage. This mechanical drive is rather formal; as such, the drive is a will, which is blind, as it is only concerned about the compulsive use of nature for its purposes. The result is destructive action against nature to satisfy one’s animalistic desires, which in effect are actions against oneself. In this approach, the moment of one’s actualization of the self in the work is missing, and the equilibrium between the purpose of work and self-consciousness is lost.

This argument of “inhibited desire” is current today if we consider the scope of digital monitoring and surveillance of work on digital platforms. Digital tools are used not only to check that tasks are performed as desired, but it can include data collection to optimize the process (i.e. to improve overall efficiency and productivity) (ILO 2021). Algorithmic management is associated with a tendency to standardize jobs and tasks. Once processes and tasks are standardized, related information can be easily (digitally) encoded and used by algorithms to manage work (Baiocco et al. 2022). This can result in what has been called the “quantified self at work” (Moore and Robinson 2016): an emerging trend to fully quantify workers’ experience in the process of work by a range of technological devices used for self-tracking. The “quantified self at work” leads to disqualifying every aspect of the process that is not quantifiable, such as humanization and creativity.

However, work is not only a mechanical activity performed to satisfy recurring desires but also an intellectual development, according to Hegel. This intellectual development has its existence in the working tool. The permanent development of tools through work not only leads to the productivity and humanization of work but also the development of consciousness. In this regard, the development of the consciousness of workers on digital platforms, for example, taxi drivers, remains restricted. The drivers are often not aware of the functioning of the algorithm, so they don’t know how to improve productivity by improving the tool. There is little transparency in how the algorithmic matching process occurs. The algorithm to assign the task to the driver is based on the estimated time of arrival, the driver’s ratings and reviews by the customer, and the number of rides canceled or accepted by the driver. But the drivers are not aware of how these data determine why a particular driver is chosen for the ride when there are multiple drivers in this particular location. The drivers often have 15 to 40 s to decide whether to accept or decline a ride (ILO 2021). Based on limited time and information about the passenger’s destination it is difficult to decide whether the ride is profitable or not. Moreover, workers have to pay for using the tool, which reduces their income:

Because the people here [taxi drivers using taxi apps], they don’t understand, they’re now driving doubly. That’s the seven percent for the mytaxi that they pay for. If they weren’t on mytaxi, they would have had the trip with us [classical dispatcher]. (Pakusch et al. 2021)

According to early Hegel tools make work easier and more productive, but work does not become less, it just becomes inferior. On the one hand, the desire for productivity and convenience increases the amount of work, and on the other, it reduces the price of goods and services, their value, and therefore the value of human work. This argument applies to the current working conditions of platform workers. Algorithmic management leads often to destructive actions, such as job and income insecurity, due to the unpredictability of work demands; difficulty to exert autonomous decisions in task performance to comply with the given instructions; accidents and mental distress at work; high work intensity to meet requirements or make a living working on platforms; and difficulties for work-life balance reconciliation because of unpredictable scheduling and prolonged online availability to get assigned tasks (Baiocco et al. 2022). Platform workers appear to earn a lower wage on average than workers in non-platform working situations and they tend to work longer and suffer more health issues (Möhlmann et al. 2021). Such limited classifications of work are intrinsic to the economics and the technological architecture of digital platforms (Cutolo and Kenney 2021). Under such restricted social, economic, and technological conditions, work cannot be a real representation of the spirit in which it is self-reflexive according to Hegel. On the contrary, it is only concerned with striving for one thing: money (Hegel 1975, Vol. 6, p. 323).

Current automation and formalization lead to the replacement of work from its specific content, meaning the inherent development of self-consciousness. According to Hegel, this specific content represents the second side of work: the satisfaction of the drive for a fulfilled existence of the self. The human will behind this drive is not only observing, but knowing that through his craft man is undermining nature, and therefore himself/herself. Through the denaturalization of work, the cunning mind awakens to a thinking self-relationship. The subject of work reflects on itself to external surroundings; it reflects on itself and knows the result of its work to be a realization of its deliberate purpose (Bienenstock 2004; Peperzak 2001; Düsing 1986). This consciousness is self-reflective and the basis for a self-conscious life. Thus, the self-regarding of one's work helps workers to understand that their work is a consciousness-immanent notion different from the mere mechanical activity for money.

A recent empirical study among taxi drivers in Germany demonstrates this drive for a fulfilled existence of the self. Taxi drivers enjoy the social part of their work and have a strong service orientation. For them, it is a matter of course that they take their customers' wishes and needs into account:

(...) taxi is a service business. Service means I open the door for the passenger, I ask if I can help, and if there is a little old mother, it goes without saying that I bring the bags at least to the front door. Or if we bring ladies home in the dark at night, it goes without saying that I wait in front of the door. I wait until she is through the door. (Pakusch et al. 2021)

This part of the taxi industry requires a very close interaction between passengers and taxi drivers, flexible support as well as social skills. Social interaction is essential for the developmental process of self-consciousness. The self recognizes itself in the external object—for example, the support of clients as a result of taxi drivers' work—and in the other self, for example, the client. Thus, self-consciousness only obtains through a process of recognizing and being recognized by others, which leads to the next argument of recognition in work relationships.

Work and Recognition in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Hegel's basic assumption is that recognition only finds satisfaction in peer self-consciousness or the equally-ranked self-consciousness of others. This outcome arises because the self only gains knowledge of itself through intersubjectivity (Hegel 1980, Vol. 9, p. 107)¹. Hegel's phenomenological concept in his late Jena writing *Phenomenology of Spirit* has two main tasks: first, the systematic exposition of the human cognitive capacities following a key concept of self-consciousness. In the literature, this is called "the idealistic history of self-consciousness" (Düsing 1993, 103; Josifovic 2008) and it means the systematic exposition of human cognitive faculties in the form of a successive acquisition of these faculties. The second purpose is to show how the self perceives and recognizes an outside-introduced object and hence, indirectly, becomes aware of it or cumulates knowledge of its self. As part of the idealistic "history of self-consciousness" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel takes up the recognition problem in the master-servant relationship²

The starting point of Hegel's argument is the struggle for mastery over others and ownership. The process of mutual recognition is a struggle because the parties find themselves in mutual alienation (or in the status naturae, referring to Hobbes). Self-consciousness takes the form of desire (e.g., for a property). The development of self-consciousness is the process of satisfying desires and thus experiencing independence (e.g., self-sufficiency in terms of the desired objects). According to Hegel, the attitudes that determine the practice of self-constitution are independence, dependence, and, more precisely, the antinomy of independence and dependence.

Hegel describes the development of self-consciousness in the struggle for mastery over ownership as a dialectical experience, as superiority over the other leads to the opposite of superiority in terms of developing one's self-consciousness. Consider first the situation of the master: The master who wins the struggle is the owner of the desired property. He sees himself as the independent employer and the servant as the dependent employee. The master doesn't recognize the servant as being equally ranked, because the servant has lost the struggle. But this asymmetrical recognition has an impact on the self-consciousness of the master. He sees himself as independent, but he experiences the opposite of independence. More specifically: In the developmental process of his self-consciousness, he is dependent on the recognition of the equally-ranked self-consciousness. Since he doesn't recognize the servant to be equally ranked, the self-knowledge of the master remains incomplete. The master's self-consciousness is underdeveloped because of his absent recognition of the servant after the struggle for superiority or in other words its development ends in the aporia of being neither independent nor being able to impose recognition.

¹ In another view, it has been argued in favor of an intra-subjective interpretation of the dialectic of recognition as a precondition of the intersubjective interaction of empirical individuals (see Josifovic 2013). It has been argued that Hegel does not at all consider the social relationship between a master and a servant as two different people. Accordingly, the relationship between master and servant represents the interplay between the mind (pure self) and body (real self) within one individual. As mentioned above, Hegel claims to expose the faculties of the human mind in the intersubjective recognition between "living self-consciousnesses" and the focus is the analysis of recognition and the involved human cognitive faculties organized by the leading idea of self-consciousness.

² The translation of "Herr und Knecht as "master and servant" corresponds to the also common translation "lord and bondsman". (Hegel 1980, Vol. 9).

The same reverse relation takes place in the self-consciousness of the servant: The servant assumes he is dependent and not recognized by the master. He works for the needs of his seemingly independent master. Since the tools and the soil to be tilled belong to the master, these objects are independent things for the servant. Through their use, he produces specific products and creates his workmanship. In his self-reflection, he recognizes his self in his work as a product, thus gaining his own form of self-understanding. He finds himself in his work. This reflection of the servant's self-consciousness through his work is experienced as independence. This is a dialectical experience because self-consciousness experiences the opposite of the initial assumption. The servant develops his self-consciousness through work. In contrast, the consciousness of the master does not develop: He creates no productive, creative work, through which he can gain self-knowledge. He only enjoys the fruits of others' work. The self-consciousness of the servant is formed by further work. This development of self-consciousness, however, is limited by work, as the tools used for work exist independently of him and he cannot keep them as his own objects. Therefore, his work is less creative and does not educate him mentally; it remains merely a technical skill in the service of his master. Originally, according to Hegel, a central example of the dialectical experience of consciousness exists: the servant sees himself as dependent and experiences independence through his work and the master thinks of himself/herself as independent and intersubjectively experiences the incomplete recognition through servile consciousness.

Hegel's argument of asymmetrical recognition applies to current work on digital platforms. Many of the workers on digital platforms are professionally employed or self-employed and are seemingly independent but in fact, they are dependent on the platform. For example, platforms tend to unilaterally determine the terms of service agreements to access the platform, such as exclusivity clauses, acceptance/rejection of work, deactivation of accounts, dispute resolution, and data usage (ILO 2021). This enables platforms to exercise considerable control over workers' freedom to work and shapes the ability to engage in human interactions, which is the basis for self-reflection and the development of self-consciousness.

Research shows that especially small taxi businesses are struggling with the decision to use taxi apps after all:

If nothing was going on at all, then I would also register with mytaxi. But if it works without mytaxi, then gladly without mytaxi. That is my attitude. I also have colleagues who use it a lot. Everybody must know that for himself. And you never know if they will increase the fees, and then you stand there. (Pakusch et al. 2021).

There is a risk of being dependent on the app operators' decisions, i.e. if operators raise one-sided fees for the participating taxi drivers. For example, many platform strategies make it very challenging for small and medium-sized firms to compete. These include the use of data and algorithms to determine the price, predict demand and supply, target consumer preferences, and provide low or zero-cost services (ILO 2021). This can lead to unfair competition, a problem compounded by the lack of proper regulatory frameworks (Schulze et al. 2021). Regulation is necessary to ensure a level playing field, where the same rules apply to both traditional and platform businesses, especially concerning social security, working conditions, and dispute resolution (ILO 2021). This is what taxi drivers, for example in Germany, expect from regulations. Research shows that no matter how the regulation was changed, Uber drivers and their vehicles would be subject to the same rules as the taxi industry:

Then Uber drivers must of course also compete under the same conditions. And if that should happen, I don't have to worry about my colleagues. If they have to do everything the way we do, and they also have to pay tax, etc. Then it won't be so cheap anymore. (Pakusch et al. 2021).

The digital platform for taxi drivers, for example, UBER, can assess performance based on real-time data and complex algorithmic processing, while workers may be unaware of the criteria for their performance evaluations, the results, and the implications of evaluations. In this sense, the digital tools used for work exist independently of the taxi driver. If a taxi driver on a digital platform, for example, doesn't know how assignments and ratings occur, he/she cannot improve, so that work is less creative and it remains merely a technical skill - a ride from A to B in the service of the platform. At the same time, the workers find themselves in their work and enjoy the interaction with clients. This reflection of the worker's self-consciousness through work is experienced as independence. For example, taxi drivers in Germany described being largely dealing with a loyal clientele, which regularly requests a service from taxi drivers that goes beyond transport from A to B (such as patient trips or trips where the passenger requires special individual support or physical assistance, e.g., if he or she is carrying luggage, or if he or she needs help with getting in and out of the vehicle or if social interaction plays a special role) (Pakusch et al. 2021).

Asymmetrical recognition has an impact on the self-consciousness of humans, who program and operate digital platforms (Rani and Furrer 2020). In the developmental process of their self-consciousness, they are dependent on the recognition of the equally-ranked self-consciousness. Since platform operators don't recognize the workers to be equally ranked, the self-knowledge of the platform operators remains incomplete. They only enjoy the fruits of others' work without any human interaction. Rather, human interaction tends to be replaced by data. The data collected gives platforms mastery and new forms of control over workers. This control is exercised by the platforms through their algorithms. As algorithmic management centralizes knowledge and control, the information asymmetries between platforms and workers can create power imbalances, which tend to deepen as transparency around algorithms and data are denied or limited (ILO 2021).

Hegel's example of the dialectical master-servant relationship demonstrates that the desire for mastery over others doesn't develop self-consciousness. Rather, in Hegel's work the master-servant problem is a representation of an asymmetric recognition that does not lead to real recognition through work: in a reversal of the way master and servant regard themselves, not each other between themselves (Düsing 1986; Gloy 1985). The master-servant problem certainly does not have socio-critical importance for Hegel—it exemplifies neither a particular historical period nor the division of capitalist society into classes³. Although Hegel is increasingly recognized as an important figure in the history of political economy, his economic views are never strictly economic (Ferro 2002) and this is true for the master-servant relationship in his *Phenomenology*, as shown above. Hegel, therefore, does not call for a radical change and a new societal theory.

Up to now, there is a big debate on the interpretation of Hegel's master-servant relationship and the recognition asymmetry in it (e., g., Habermas, Honneth, Butler, and many

³ Karl Marx (1943) explicitly praises Hegel's *Phenomenology*, in which man is conceived through his work, and concludes that the future, because of his relationship to work, belongs to the servant. Marx's interpretation that incorporated the historic moments in *Phenomenology* continues to have adherents (Marcuse 1941; Kojève 1969; Honneth 1995; Klikauer 2012), but it does not reach the core of Hegel's arguments on developing self-consciousness, as explained above.

others). In Habermas' view, the master-servant dialectic represents rather a dialectical connection of linguistic symbolization, work, and interaction, which determines the concept of the mind (Habermas 1967 p. 13). According to Habermas Hegel combines work and interaction from the standpoint of emancipation from the violence of both external and internal nature. In the work, the subject first experiences itself as an (impotent) object which is subject to the forces of nature; by learning to make available the resources of nature for the satisfaction of its needs, it regains itself as a subject (distinguishable) from the objects. According to Habermas Hegel locates the dialectic of the self and the other within the framework of intersubjectivity. The self does not communicate with itself as his other, rather the self communicates with another self as another. The self is formed by language and interaction in the communication processes with others. Based on the mutual recognition of the interacting subjects in an ideal communication society, their self-consciousness is formed. According to Habermas recognition is the moral principle of the ideal communication society. This assumption has been often criticized. The fundamental criticism concerns the circle or the *petitio principii*. The moral norms of this society are to be created by a discourse that is open to discussion and capable of argument. However, the communicating people are already putting their moral norms and interests into the discourse (*petitio principii*). The ideal communication society, in which the moral norms are to be found, seems to be a moral society that provides values, duties, and virtues for the individuals, which are then redefined in constant communication processes. In this way, morality is not justified but merely described in its genesis. Moreover, the solution to the recognition problem in the discourse can be doubted. The recognition of the discourse partners solely based on linguistic habits does not seem to be sufficient for the reasonableness of the agreement reached in the dialogue. Especially when dealing with the problems of the economic scarcity of resources and goods, the reasonableness of the consensus and the optimism in this respect are doubtful. With Hegel, it can be argued against this view that there can be no reasonable consensus in discourse if the individual wills involved in the discourse are not reasonable. Habermas' interpretation of the recognition problem referring to Hegel is problematic because he strictly rejects an ultimate foundation in universal consciousness. The experiences of the consciousness presented in *Phenomenology* are not experiences of the individual, but stages of a reflection process of self-consciousness in the educational process up to the stage of the universal consciousness (Siep, 1979 and 2008). Hegel's *Phenomenology* represents an educational process of the mind in interactions and institutions, which he develops with the basic principle of recognition. The principle is rather the process of the mutual constitution of individual and universal consciousness.

Referring to early Hegel a prominent contemporary philosopher Honneth, a scholar of Habermas and one of the leading recognition philosophers of today, develops an outline of a critical societal theory in which processes of social change are explained by normative claims, which are structured in reciprocal recognition relations. By referring to early Hegel in his Jena writings he argues that the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition because one can develop a practical relation to self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction (Honneth 1995, 92). For him, Hegel's master-servant chapter of *Phenomenology* is inspiring because it serves as a logic for the understanding of intersubjective conflicts. Honneth has argued that Hegel sacrificed the initial intersubjectivity in his early writings to a monologic concept of the spirit in his late Jena writing. This has been criticized (e., g., Siep 2008) and he already revised it (Honneth 2010, p.7).

From Honneth's perspective the digital platform model, mentioned above, can be seen as a "normative paradox" (Visser and Arnold 2021): while the digital platform model

promises an environment where flexibility, self-actualization, and autonomy are the norms, it allows platforms to influence material working conditions in such a way as to prevent the realization of these norms. This appears to be a “paradox” because of Honneth’s optimistic view of the possibility of such promises and mutual recognition under the current neoliberal capitalism. Originally, according to Hegel, this is not a paradox but an example of the antinomy of independence and dependence demonstrating that the desire for mastery over others doesn’t develop one’s self-consciousness because of limited self-reflection. Recognition is not directed primarily at characteristics that are attributed to a person or ascribed to that person’s value. According to Honneth acts of recognition realize a distinctive intention that is directed at the value of another person. Rather, it is directed at the possibility of determining him/herself to others (Bertram and Celikates 2013).

Conclusion

For Hegel recognition is only complete if the self-consciousness reflects itself in another living and equally ranked self-consciousness. The master believes that his/her self-consciousness is complete. But in the developmental process of his/her self-consciousness, he/she is dependent on the recognition of the equally-ranked self-consciousness. He/she experiences the opposite of full recognition because of his/her absent recognition of the servant after the struggle for superiority. This thinking is applicable today if we consider the functioning of digital platforms. The asymmetrical recognition inhibits the self-consciousness of both – workers and operators of digital platforms. Self-consciousness remains in stages where self-thinking as self-determination has not yet been achieved. If the self cannot relate to the work and the working tools, they remain alien to him/her and his/her work becomes dull, his/her consciousness cannot develop itself, because self-reflection is limited. Only when the working conditions and tools are experienced as a sort of intellectual work, are workers able to improve them and grow personally. Only when operators of digital platforms recognize the workers as equally-ranked, for example by providing data transparency and decision rights, they can gain self-knowledge and flourish.

Outlook

Hegel’s thoughts on social interaction about self-consciousness make clear that someone is only recognized in the context of human interaction of equally ranked selves and work is self-reflective. The data and not the interaction is integral to algorithmic management practices in digital platforms. But data on workers’ performance cannot replace human interaction and recognition. With the rapid expansion of algorithmic management and the emergence of new power dynamics in the workplace human interactions tend to be replaced from their specific content – the inherent development of self-consciousness. Self-reflection is limited, especially for workers, clients, and businesses on digital platforms. Lead only by algorithms the digital platform workers are deprived of social relationships and therefore of the specific content of meaningful work. To balance the power relationships on digital platforms we need to engage in a critical analysis of the tools that technology puts at our disposal and more general of the norms for access to data, algorithms, and platforms.

With Hegel, we can continue to argue that human interactions and reflexive practices establish the norms to which interacting individuals reciprocally bind themselves. One can

therefore only attain recognition when one binds oneself to determinate norms—primarily norms of reflection (Bertram and Celikates 2013). From a broadly Hegelian perspective, the platform’s role is to provide such norms of reflection. How norms and institutional structures of reflection are to be designed might be a starting point for future research that would seek a deeper understanding of situations where work can be a real representation of the spirit in which it is self-reflexive.

Institutional practices and modes of discourse are necessary for workers to link their subjective aims with objectively valid societal aims, embodied in the firm’s purpose within society (Bernacchio 2022). For this, future research needs to view digital business organizations in a novel, broader “aesthetic” way, one reaching beyond the economic or merely technological way (Dobson 2021, 2022). The aesthetic ideal of a firm is conceived as a technology that facilitates a technology-free site of potential for humans to reflect on ideas and flourish. Thus, developing self-consciousness towards ideals that are practically, or at least theoretically, viable forms the basis for personal growth.

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Declarations

Competing Interests None

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