

The Gaze That Ranks

*On mogging, the blackpill,
and the surrender of the self*

An essay in social criticism

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1. The word

A word has been making its way out of the stranger precincts of the internet and into ordinary speech, and like most such words it arrives already worn smooth from use. To *mog* someone is to beat them so plainly in looks, height, or presence that their standing drops merely from being near you. You stand next to a better-looking man and you have been mogged; he has done nothing but exist beside you. The term descends from *AMOG*, alpha male of the group, a relic of the pickup-artist forums of the early 2000s, and it now does steady work in the vocabulary of the looksmaxxing communities, where mostly young men exchange regimens and verdicts on the unalterable geometry of their own faces.

The temptation is to file this under the disposable, the slang that surfaces and sinks without leaving a mark. I think that would be a mistake. *Mogging* is interesting less for what it is than for what it rests on, and what it rests on is old. The men who have organized their despair around it have managed, without meaning to and without reading a line of him, to reconstruct one of the oldest arguments in modern philosophy — and then to carry it past the point where its author thought it broke down. I have spent more hours in these forums than I can defend, and I want to be plain about the stance I came away with, because the whole essay depends on it. I have no patience for the blackpill as a doctrine and less for the men who profit by preaching it. But the boys reciting it are not the enemy of this essay. They are its occasion. What struck me, reading them, was never the cruelty. It was the rigor — the awful care with which a frightened person will build the cage he then cannot leave. What I want to do is take that seriously enough to find where they are right, which is further than most critics will allow, and where being right curdles into the thing that traps them.

Strip away the vocabulary and *mogging* names something with no novelty in it at all. The mogged man's diminishment is not in him. It lives in the encounter and nowhere else; remove the better-looking party and it evaporates, having altered nothing about the man it humbled. His worth, on this telling, is not a thing he carries but a thing assigned to him from outside, in the instant of being seen beside someone else. Standing is conferred, not held; it lives between people rather than within them. About this much the forums are not deluded. They have simply found the grimmer half of a truth whose better half they never reached.

2. The machinery

The truth they half-found is Hegel's. In the passage on lordship and bondage — *Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*, where *Knecht* is nearer to bondsman than to slave — two self-consciousnesses meet, and each discovers that it cannot supply its own sense of itself out of its own resources. It needs *recognition*, *Anerkennung*: the acknowledgment by another consciousness that it, too, is one. The self, for Hegel, is not a private holding but a relation. It becomes actual only in being taken as actual by another.

From this, the looksmaxxers keep only the dependence and miss what Hegel does with it. The master, in the parable, wins. He compels the other to recognize him, beats him into

acknowledgment, takes by force what cannot be given freely. And in the winning the prize goes dead in his hand, because the recognition he has extracted issues from someone he has just defined as less than a person, and the word of a creature you hold beneath contempt is worth nothing. The master has built a machine whose only output is the testimony of a witness he has already disqualified. He is acknowledged, and the acknowledgment is air. This is the hinge, and it swings far wider than the parable. Any standing won by lowering another carries the same flaw in its construction: what the contest was secretly for — to be found worthy by someone whose finding counts — is destroyed by the means of winning it, because ranking yourself over a man strips him of the authority to confer the very thing you wanted. Domination cannot deliver the good it reaches for. The structure forbids it.

There is a second, slower failure that Hegel tracks past the moment of victory, and the essay will need it at the end, so it is worth marking now. The master, having won, settles into consumption. The world is brought to him; he negates it, uses it up, and is left exactly where he began, needing the next thing. He develops nothing, because consuming develops no one — it is a loop that produces only its own repetition. The bondsman, meanwhile, is set to work, and work is a wholly different relation to the world. Forced to hold his desire in check rather than devour, made to labour on the thing instead of consuming it, he puts his own form into the material, and the worked object stands there afterward as a piece of his mind made durable, a self externalized where he can see it. Hegel's claim, startling on first meeting, is that the loser is the one who comes to possess a self. The man who trembled, who served, who worked, acquires a being-for-self the master never gets near. Hold onto this. It is the most hopeful thing in the dialectic, and it turns out to answer a question this essay cannot reach until its close: what, concretely, does a man at the bottom *do*?

Hegel's own way out of the impasse is recognition that runs both ways — two subjects, each granting the other the standing of a free self, neither subordinate, each finding itself in the other. And here the forums and the tradition part for good, because mutual recognition rests on something the forums cannot afford to believe: that recognition is not scarce. The objection to this comes at once, and it is a good one. How can standing not be scarce? Two men cannot both be the tallest. Two cannot both be the most beautiful. Where the prize is position itself, one man's rise is another's fall, and no philosophy dissolves the arithmetic.

The objection is half right, and the right half matters. Fred Hirsch gave the distinction its name. Some goods are *positional*: their whole value is rank — the tallest, the richest, the top of the scale — and their supply is fixed by definition, so that my gaining is your losing. Others carry their value absolutely, indifferent to where anyone else stands. Height-rank is positional; so is the looksmax itself. About this narrow stretch of the world the mogging instinct is accurate, not deluded — the supply of best-looking man in the room is exactly one, and it is taken. But recognition, in Hegel's sense, is not a positional good. (Hirsch set the positional against the *material*, the goods that stop conferring status the moment everyone has them; the good I mean is a third kind he never named, the relational good of being acknowledged.) To recognize another as a free subject is not to rank him above other men. It is to grant him a standing he shares with every subject there is. The difference is

the difference between an order and an equivalence. An order has one summit and forces everyone beneath it. An equivalence has no summit at all: every member can hold the same standing at once, and admitting one costs the others nothing. Two men cannot both be tallest. Two men can both be wholly persons. The first is a competition; the second was never one, and the forums' deepest error is to have melted the equivalence down into the order — to have taken everything that was not scarce and made it scarce by fiat.

Suppose one grants the forums their premise anyway and stakes one's worth on the contested summit, on the unstable peak where the whole field is pushing. Is this not the braver bet — a more honest victory, a self emboldened by refusing the smaller comforts? The thought has a pedigree and deserves better than dismissal. It is the agonistic ideal of the Greeks, the *agon* that drove Pindar's victors and Homer's killers, the Nietzschean noble who makes value by overcoming. Striving for the unique summit is, historically, what produced a great deal of human excellence; security produced little. To wave the impulse away is to side with the figure Nietzsche despised above all others, the last man of *Zarathustra*, who has abolished risk and calls his comfort happiness.

But the agonistic defence fails here, and it fails by the forums' own arithmetic. If standing is positional and therefore conserved — if the total quantity of rank in a population cannot be raised, only moved around — then to stake one's worth on the summit is to enter a game that, by construction, almost everyone must lose. The peak is nearly singular and the competitors run to the millions. The emboldened self one sees and admires is a survivor, visible precisely because he won, while the enormous field that ran the identical strategy and was broken by it stays out of frame. To reason from the winner to the wisdom of the wager is survivorship bias with a workout plan. And the winner's prize is the master's prize: his standing sits entirely in the hands of his rivals and the next man up, and he cannot stop, because the instant he stops the rank is taken. The directness that made his victory feel more real than mere mutual regard is its defect — it is direct because the verdict is handed down from outside, continuously, by the same people he is trying to beat. He has subcontracted the verdict on his own worth to the field and learned to call the inability to set it down strength. The bold-seeming bet buys the least freedom of any on offer. He is bold the way a man at the table is bold while the cards run his way, which is to say only until they stop.

One might hope to escape by refinement — by winnowing the self down to some essential, defensible core and staking worth there instead, on the part that cannot be taken. But the regress does not bottom out. Strip yourself to the barest, most winnowed version you can defend, and there is still an axis along which you can be ranked, still someone further down the same line. There is no self so pure it steps off the scale; rank is relational all the way down, and the search for a *secure position* is a search for a thing the structure does not contain. This is not cause for despair. It is the proof, arrived at from the inside, that the exit was never a better position. If competition survives infinite winnowing, then nothing positional was ever going to be safe — and the only thing the regress cannot reach is the thing that was never on the axis to begin with.

3. The believers

It remains to look directly at the people caught in this, and at the doctrine they have built, because it is more formidable than its critics allow. A peculiarity of these communities is worth dwelling on first: the traits they fix upon are prized *because* they cannot be altered. Bone, the set of a jaw, the breadth of a frame, the hairline's appointed retreat, the depth of a voice, the brute accumulation of age, and in the uglier rooms race itself. The fixity is not incidental to the appeal. It is the appeal. A trait no effort can buy cannot be faked, and so it reads as the most honest signal, the surest evidence of what a man is under the surface. More than that, a fixed trait settles the unbearable question of responsibility, and settles it in opposite directions for opposite men: for the one who has it, status arrives as something owed rather than won, free of the dread of upkeep; for the one who lacks it, failure converts into injustice — he did not fall short, he was foreclosed. This is the exact motion Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, the recasting of one's own weakness as the world's crime, the slave's revaluation that turns disadvantage into proof of a rigged order. And a hierarchy founded on fixed traits feels less like a human arrangement than a law of nature, which has the double convenience of absolving the men at the bottom and crowning the men at the top, since a law of nature is nobody's fault and cannot be resented as cheating the way a riggable game can.

There are two industries that feed on this, and I have come to despise them about equally. One sells the cage: the looksmaxxing economy, the surgeons and gurus who confirm that the boy's face is his destiny and then bill him for the destiny. The other sells a key that fits no lock: the self-help genre that tells him to simply love himself, addressed to the one axis where he is right and the world is real, asking him to fix by feeling differently a thing that is actually the case. He can smell the condescension in the second from across the internet, and he is correct to, which is part of why he trusts the first. Both have decided he is a market. Neither has decided he is a person. And what makes the fixed trait attractive — that it lies past all effort, that outcome is cut loose from will — is the very thing that makes worth anchored to it inescapable. The reassurance and the cell are one fact seen twice; *it is not my fault* and *there is nothing I can do* are a single sentence read from either end.

The hardest version of the creed calls itself the *blackpill*: the conviction that attractiveness is mostly fixed and inherited, that people select for the traits hardest to counterfeit, that the resulting order is real and its losers genuinely lose. The reflex, for anyone who finds it distasteful, is to call it false. It is not false, and the failure to grant that is exactly why no one ever talks anyone out of it. The blackpill is assembled from true parts. Attractiveness is partly fixed. People do prefer signals that cannot be faked. Positional competition is zero-sum, and most must lose. Each premise survives inspection. What does not survive is the conclusion, and the rot is entirely in the joint that holds it to the premises.

The fallacy is a substitution carried out so quietly it never draws attention to itself. Every true premise concerns a positional good, rank in a market for faces. The conclusion concerns *worth* — whether a man has lost at being alive. Somewhere in the passage, attractiveness has been swapped for value, standing-on-one-axis for standing-as-a-person, and the blackpill

proves the narrow true thing about rank and then quietly cashes it as a verdict on a life. It assumes, without troubling to argue, that no part of worth lies off the positional axis — that the unranked floor is simply zero. That assumption is not a finding. It is the conclusion, wearing the costume of a premise and let in through the front door. A second error rides beside it: human pairing is not one order along a single fixed axis but a many-dimensioned assortment — temperament, nearness, timing, humour, the accidents of a shared life — in which the great majority of people, including those the forums have written off, do in fact find someone. A theory that predicts mass involuntary solitude in a population where most people pair off is not hard-nosed realism. It has been falsified and is declining to notice.

The third error is the subtlest, and the most important, because it is the one that makes the doctrine unfalsifiable from the inside. The blackpill manufactures its own evidence. It recruits the men already losing on the one axis it can see, persuades them that the axis is the whole of value and cannot be changed, and they proceed to experience themselves as having lost at life. The belief produces the proof of itself. And confronted with anything that would disturb the proof, the man at the bottom does not weigh it; he selects against it, reaching past the studies that complicate his verdict for the ones that ratify it. One can point out, accurately, that much of the science he leans on is thin — that the celebrated correlations between fixed traits and outcomes are often small, the certainty manufactured somewhere on the way from the journal to the forum. One can point this out, and it will change nothing, and the reason it changes nothing is the whole matter. He is not held by the data. He was never held by the data. He is holding a myth — that he is, at the root, lesser — and the science is recruited afterward to dress the myth in the authority of fact. Debunk the study and the myth simply finds another; the need was upstream of the evidence the entire time.

This is why the deflationary reply, the cheerful correction of his statistics, is not merely ineffective but a kind of insult: it answers a man's grief about his own worth by quibbling with his footnotes. The belief that one is fundamentally less is among the gravest things a human being can come to hold, and it has to be met as that — as a wound in the sense of self, arrived at by someone reasoning, not raving, whose contact with reality is intact everywhere except the one place it has folded inward. To wave it away as bad science or mere negativity is to decline the encounter the man actually needs. The task is not to win the argument about correlation coefficients. It is to go into the mind that has, lucidly and without madness, talked itself into its own diminishment, and to find what is there holding the door shut.

4. The world and the gaze

Two objections stand between that diagnosis and any consolation, and both are serious enough that the consolation is worthless until they are faced. The first is empirical and nearly unanswerable on its own terms. Why should anyone value the unranked floor when society plainly does not? The premiums paid to the beautiful and the tall are real and

measured, in wages and in courtrooms and in the distribution of tenderness. Society rewards the positional and overlooks the floor. To deny it is to lie.

So one had better not deny it, but notice instead that *value* is doing two jobs in the sentence. There is what society rewards — the standing it hands out, the doors it opens — and there is what actually functions in a life, the thing that carries a man through loss and lets him go on acting. The two come apart completely. The first is what the world will pay you for; the second is what keeps the life livable from the inside when the world pays you nothing. One does not anchor worth to the floor in order to be paid for it. One anchors there because it is the thing that goes on working when the payments stop. And there is a deeper turn under the objection. Why does society reward the positional? Because society is, in its very build, a comparison engine; it sorts and allots by rank because rank is what it can read. It is the same zero-sum machine already shown to immiserate most who play it. To ask why one should value the floor when society does not is to propose taking one's instructions from the house on how to value one's chips. Society can afford for most players to lose; it averages over millions. The man cannot afford it, because he is not the average but a single outcome, one life with one run at it. The floor matters because the world will not catch the man who draws badly. And most, by the arithmetic, draw badly. Society's indifference to the floor is the very reason the man who cannot afford to lose must prize the thing the world will not.

The second objection runs deeper than economics. Why is reality arranged so that this causes so much pain — and why does the arrangement feel less like a custom than a law? The hierarchy has the texture of something objective. Standing next to a better-looking man and feeling diminished is not a belief one can argue oneself out of; it arrives unbidden, below the level of choice, with the authority of a fact. The answer, I think, is that the machinery was never built for our wellbeing. It was built for replication under scarcity. The instinct to rank, the urgency that attends it, the way being out-competed registers not as disappointment but as something nearer to annihilation — these were tuned in a world where status tracked survival and reproduction directly, where the felt stakes answered to consequences that were, ancestrally, enormous. Pain was never the system's concern. Pain was the system's lever. What feels unbearable feels that way because feeling-unbearable did reproductive work, not because the thing is, examined coldly, unbearable. This is why the hierarchy seems objective: the cues are older than culture, written underneath it, and a signal that old wears the mask of a natural law.

But *evolved* and *objective* are not the same word, and the whole of freedom lives in the gap between them. That the ranking instinct is ancient, automatic, and shared explains why it is hard to refuse; it does not make it true, and it does not make it binding. The treadmill is real — I have spent this essay insisting on its reality. What evolution installed was not the treadmill but the conviction that the treadmill *must own you*, that its verdict is the verdict, that to be ranked low is to be, in some final sense, less. That conviction is the part that was useful to our genes and is no longer useful to us, and it can be seen for what it is, which is the first condition of declining it. This also explains the peculiar quality of the wound.

People do not merely regret being out-ranked; they feel *violated*, as though a promise had been broken. But one does not feel betrayed by a law of nature; betrayal requires a believed entitlement. The sense of violation exposes a buried contract — the assumption that the world had agreed to honour merit on these axes, that doing well by them was owed its reward. There was never such a contract. The pain of being ranked low is partly the pain of discovering that a contract one had counted on was imaginary all along. That is a bitter discovery, and also a door: a contract you never held is a contract you can stop spending your life trying to enforce.

What is actually lost, in the moment of being seen as lower, is something Sartre named more precisely than anyone. He split our being in two. There is being-*for-itself*, the open, unfinished, self-revising inside of a person, the part that chooses and is never quite done and outruns any description anyone could fix to it. And there is being-*for-others*, the self as it shows up in someone else's world, an object with settled properties, sorted and ranked and finished. The event he called the Look, *le regard*, is the moment the second swallows the first: under another's eyes a man feels himself caught as a thing with a nature, and feels his own inside drain out of the scene, frozen into a verdict passed from somewhere he cannot reach. *Mogging* is the Look running along a single axis. To be ranked, to be seen as lower, is to have one's for-itself — the open, choosing interior — pressed flat into a coordinate on a scale. The traits the forums brood over are, in Sartre's terms, a man's *facticity*: the given facts of face and frame and height, what he is as an object for others. The unranked floor is the *for-itself*, the freedom that no ranking can capture because it is not the sort of thing that takes a place on a scale at all.

And now the blackpill can be named exactly. It is the program of persuading a man to identify himself wholly with his being-for-others — to take the gaze's verdict as the entire truth of him, to fold his interior freedom down into the object he appears as. Sartre had a word for this, and it is not pessimism. It is *bad faith*, *mauvaise foi*, the flight from one's own freedom by playing at being merely a thing with a fixed nature, a being that simply is what it is with nothing left over to choose. Bad faith is comfortable, because freedom is a weight and facticity sets it down — the same relief the fixed traits were offering all along. But Sartre also forces a correction on everything said so far. The gaze does objectify; that much is unavoidable, a permanent condition of living among others. What it cannot do is make a man coincide with the object he appears as. The Other supplies the being-for-others; only the self supplies the verdict that this is the whole. To be seen as lower and to be lower to oneself are two events, and the gap between them is freedom. The wound of the gaze is real and lands and cannot be wished off. But its totalization — the act by which the wound becomes the entire man — needs his own signature. The Other can objectify you. The Other cannot author you, unless you agree that he has.

5. The floor

So we reach the shape of the thing with the padding off, and there is no honest way to round its edges. Everything I despise about the blackpill — its certainty, its contempt, its appetite for the worst reading of every fact — is a thing I can only fight by refusing to flatter the men who hold it. They have been lied to enough, warmly, by people selling them surgery and people selling them affirmations. The compassion this essay can offer is not a softer verdict. It is the refusal to lie. For the man who draws badly on the traits the world pays for, the situation is this: the lower regard is real and will not be talked away by any inward adjustment. Anchoring himself to the floor will not buy the standing back, will not make the world applaud, will not get him chosen. The counsel is not *do this and they will come round*. It is *do this, and carry the fact that often they will not*. Any advice that hides this cost is selling the blackpill's promise back to him with the sign flipped.

What the floor buys is not standing. It is another quantity altogether — the capacity to act, to take a loss, to live the life from the inside as one's own rather than as a sentence read out by others. The man with the floor and low standing and the man with the floor and high standing hold the same thing where it counts; the standing differs, the part that carries the life does not. The real choice, for nearly everyone, was never the romantic one the forums picture, *low status but proudly staked on the peak*, because that wager hands not boldness but collapse to the losing majority. The choice is narrower and quieter: between a low-standing life that stays one's own to live and a low-standing life suffered as annihilation. The outward facts are identical. The inside is opposite. The one variable that was ever actually up to the man is whether he keeps the for-itself the gaze cannot reach, or signs even that over to the people who were never going to give the recognition back.

A confusion sits in the word *floor*, though, and the consolation turns on dispelling it. There is the floor in the first sense, low position on the ranked axes — the bad cards, the face one did not choose, the height one cannot add to. A man can be stuck here, and it is worth saying without softening that some men are dealt badly on these axes and will stay there, and that no inward adjustment rewrites the cards. And there is the floor in the second sense, which is not a low place at all but bedrock: the for-itself, the unranked ground of being a subject, the thing the gaze cannot reach. This is not where a man is stuck. It is where he stands. The whole error the essay has chased is the collapse of the first floor into the second — the conviction that because a man is low in the rankings he is low all the way down, that the bad cards run to the foundation. They do not. The rankings sit on the surface of a life. They were never its ground.

A caution is needed here, because the bedrock is easy to mislocate, and mislocating it hands the whole game back. The floor is not the respect of others. It is tempting to say it is — to make mutual recognition itself the foundation, since recognition is the good this essay has held against rank from the start. But if the ground a man stood on were the respect he had won, it would be revocable, conferred and withdrawn by others, and we would be back at the supplicant trembling before a verdict he cannot secure. That is not bedrock; that is rank with a kinder name. What a man holds alone is not the *achievement* of recognition

but the *standing that makes him eligible for it* — his bare reality as a free subject, which no one grants and no one can revoke. Mutual respect is then what he does *from* the floor, with others who stand on theirs; it is the exchange the ground makes possible, not the ground itself. Confuse the two and the recursion returns to eat you: any floor defined by winning respect can always be out-ranked, but a floor defined by mere eligibility for it — by being the kind of thing that can recognize and be recognized at all — is the one standing the winnowing cannot reach.

The objection to all this is that it counsels mere contentment at the bottom, and something in us refuses that, rightly. We are not built to remain on the floor; the reaching, the wanting-more, the refusal to settle is not vanity but a feature of being the kind of creature whose existence is a project and not a fact. Hegel's self does not sit in a citadel; it goes out into the world. But the objection bites only while the two floors are confused. We are not built to stay on the first, and we are not asked to. What changes is not whether a man reaches but what he stands on while he reaches. The man with no bedrock — who has staked his whole existence on the rankings, for whom the surface is the foundation — cannot in fact rise, because every loss is total and every comparison existential, and a creature that cannot survive a loss cannot risk the reaching that rising costs. He is the worst-equipped of all to climb, since he cannot afford to fall even once. The bedrock is not the alternative to rising. It is its precondition.

And this is where the bondsman returns to collect what he was owed. The first of the ordinary human motions — to make something — is more than one item on a list, because it is how the floor stops being merely a place to stand and becomes a thing a man builds. The floor is not only refused; it is constituted, and it is constituted through work. A man who labours on something, who holds his wanting in check long enough to put his own form into a material and leave it standing there when he is done, externalizes a self into the world, and that worked thing is then his — durable, outside the reach of any ranking, a piece of him the gaze did not author and cannot revoke. This is exactly what the master, consuming, never acquires. He has rank and no self; the bondsman has a self and made it with his hands. So the answer to the question that has hung over the whole essay — what does a man at the bottom actually *do*, beyond declining to be annihilated? — is not nothing, and it is not merely to endure. He works. He makes. And in making he builds the very floor he then stands on, which is why the activity matters more than its reception: the worked thing constitutes the self whether or not the world ranks it highly, because its function was never to win the ranking. It was to exist, and to be his.

There is a last asymmetry here, nearly cruel in its symmetry, and I want to state it without romance. Where a man sits in the hierarchy decides how hard the question of the floor gets pressed upon him. The comfortable are not asked. Their rank cushions them; they can build an entire life on positional sand and never once meet the storm that would test the foundation, and a great many never do — they get to keep not knowing, all the way to the end. The man at the bottom is granted no such mercy. The hierarchy bears down on him hardest, and so he is driven to the question the comfortable are spared: what is left when

rank is gone? Most who are driven there find nothing, because no one ever told them there was anything beneath the rankings to find, and they conclude the blackpill was right after all. This is the real tragedy of the thing, and it is worth not flinching from: the search is forced on exactly the people least equipped to complete it.

But the few who do complete it — who locate the floor precisely because they were pushed all the way down to where it lies — arrive at something the comfortable never reach, and it is worth being exact about what this is and is not. Suffering does not grant the freedom; that is the sentimental lie, and plenty suffer and find nothing, and no justice is done in their being made to suffer. Suffering only removes the alternatives. It strips away every positional consolation, one by one, until the single thing left to stand on is the only thing that was ever load-bearing. The bottom is not where freedom lives. It is where the lie runs out — and when the lie runs out, what is underneath it was there the whole time, for everyone, including the men at the top who were never forced to look and so never learned it was there. The man who was driven to the bottom and found the floor is, in the one sense that survives the entire argument, freer than the men who mogged him. Not better off. Not spared anything. Not owed an apology that will come. Freer. Those are different words, and the distance between them is the whole of what there is to win.

So the rankings are real, and they cost, and most of us will lose them; the essay has conceded this from the first page and concedes it still. It has only refused the one further step the blackpill demands — that losing the rankings is losing the self. The gaze can rank a man. It cannot author him. To go on living at the floor is not to accept defeat; it is to keep standing where one always stood, on the one ground that was never up for ranking, and from there, in time and among others who are also more than their place in the order, to make something, and in the making to become someone the ranking cannot touch. The floor was never the end of anything. It was only ever the place a man stands to begin.

A note on sources

This essay argues through its sources rather than about them, and makes no claim to original scholarship on Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartre, or Hirsch; the readings are the standard ones, turned to a present purpose. The four frameworks were checked against current secondary literature for fidelity. Where the essay stretches a thinker's concept past its original scope — most plainly in treating recognition as a third category alongside Hirsch's positional and material goods — the stretch is marked in the text. Readers who want the arguments should go to the primary works, listed below in widely available English translations.

References

Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807]. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. — The dialectic of lordship and bondage (*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*) appears in the “Self-Consciousness” chapter, under “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness.” Both the hollowness of coerced recognition and the bondsman’s self-formation through labour belong to this section.

Hirsch, Fred. *Social Limits to Growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976. — Origin of the concept of *positional goods*, whose value derives from relative rank and which therefore cannot be distributed more widely without destroying the value they confer. Hirsch’s own contrast is between positional and *material* goods; the essay’s category of non-positional *relational* goods is an extension.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality* [1887]. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998. — Source of *ressentiment* and the “slave revolt in morality”: the imaginary vengeance of those prevented from a genuine reaction, who reinterpret their own powerlessness as virtue and recast the powerful as evil.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883–85]. Translated by Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. — Source of the “last man,” who has abolished risk and aspiration and calls his comfort happiness.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943]. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. — Source of the Look (*le regard*), being-for-others (*l’être-pour-autrui*), the for-itself/in-itself distinction, facticity and transcendence, and bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). Sartre defines bad faith as the conflation of facticity and transcendence in either direction; the essay foregrounds the flight into facticity, the form relevant to its argument.

Supplementary

Honneth, Axel. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995. — The major contemporary development of Hegelian recognition into a theory of social justice and of misrecognition as harm.