

The Slave Mentality: Morality of Spirit in Hegel's Lordship and Bondage

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§ 1 – Introduction

The master-slave dialectic which occurs in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* represents a crucial role in his ambitious project to cure European culture. At the turn of the 19th century, Hegel perceived Western culture as one inflicted with a pathology of implicitly contradictory dualisms which cause man to be unhappy and divided in himself. In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel lays bare the philosophical horizon for a system of broadly scoped monisms that will transform man's cognition and perception of the other through the development of consciousness. The section entitled *Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage* is critical to Hegel's dialectical derivation of the development of self-consciousness, the moment when consciousness becomes aware of itself, when recognized by another. This derivation permits an interpretation of Hegel in such a way that a moral structure of relations between two self-consciousnesses can exist. What would form a moral dimension of recognition? Delving further, what would be the nature of this inter-subjective context of morality?

The goal of my project will be to present a moral system consistent both with Hegel's master-slave dialectic and his Spirit, the ultimate state in the development of consciousness, where all self-consciousnesses may enjoy perfect freedom in a harmonious existence as one entity. Though Hegel does not write about morality in his dialectic, my analysis will draw out a moral dimension implied in Spirit through the dialectic. In order to achieve the morality of Spirit, I will approach the dialectic in two ways. First, I will interpret the dialectic as a phenomenological account of history, where, through history, self-consciousness comes to know itself through inevitable engagement with other self-consciousnesses. Second, I will inject a psychological state into self-consciousness, which will develop through self-consciousness'

engagement with other self-consciousnesses in an historical process. Here, both history and the psychological state progress toward a common end in Spirit. Thus, morality in Hegel's master-slave dialectic shall be achieved at the culmination of the historical evolution of self-consciousness' psychological state.

In this discussion, I claim that the morality of Spirit in Hegel's master-slave dialectic is the recognition of another as a self-consciousness. This recognition, in turn, allows self-consciousness to become certain of itself as a being-for-itself. I argue that recognition is only possible with the psychological state I name the "slave mentality." In order to derive recognition from the slave mentality, I will identify two psychological states in the dialectic. The first will be the primordial psychological state of self-consciousness, which precedes the initial and inevitable engagement of one self-consciousness with another. The second psychological state will be one that is fashioned in the enslavement of one self-consciousness by another, which will occur after the life and death struggle. Afterwards, I move beyond the dialectic and present a third psychological state, which I will determine to be the final psychological state that is necessary for Spirit and, consequently, for morality.

§ 2 – The Conception of Morality: The First and Primordial Psychological State

Our first task in deriving the main morals from Hegel's master-slave dialectic is to understand how self-consciousness operates before its first encounter with another self-consciousness. In doing so, I will shed light on how this operation of self-consciousness leads to the eventual development of morality in self-consciousness' relation with another. Self-consciousness, to begin, is both the antithetic natures of subject and object, split in an internal contradiction. This is because, as a subject, self-consciousness is a being-for-itself, a being who perceives his

immediate world as one that is only for itself; as an object, self-consciousness is a being-in-itself that exists in the world for everything beyond itself (being-for-other). To remedy this inner strife, self-consciousness approaches the world in the form of “desire,” or the pursuit of self-certainty through the exercising of one’s power over everything that is other for it, the other being the world of objects.

In this psychological state, self-consciousness is certain of itself as a self-consciousness in the fulfillment of its desire through its negation of other beings; put simply, self-consciousness recognizes itself in the event that it perceives its being having an effect on the beings that exist beyond it. When self-consciousness negates an outside object, it negates itself as a mere object in the world and establishes itself as a sovereign subject of its immediate world. In this self-negation, self-consciousness negates itself in the dialectical sense rather than negating itself into non-existence. For example, by picking a fruit and eating it, I demonstrate that I can exercise my power over it according to my inclinations and that I am the only essential part of this relationship. In this process of negation, the object is lost; self-consciousness must continue a perpetual pursuit of negation to achieve vanishing moments of self-certainty.

From this discussion, we must ask an essential question: How can self-consciousness achieve lasting self-certainty? To answer this, we must first make clear that self-consciousness cannot become self-certain from being present to itself or from turning the mind’s eye to itself. In order to fulfill its desire, self-consciousness must come out of itself and, in a sense, enter into the world in order to return back to itself. As such, self-consciousness always recognizes itself

through what is outside of it, and so must search for a source of perpetual recognition in the world of objects.

Knowing this, let us recall that self-consciousness achieves self-certainty through the negation of an object. In order to attain perpetual self-certainty, self-consciousness needs an object which may be negated but remains in existence. However, this is impossible, since no object can remain in existence after being negated. Now, we must recall once more that self-consciousness recognizes itself through the world and notice that self-consciousness is distinct in its ability to negate itself in the act of negating an object. In this self-negation, self-consciousness remains in existence since it is a self-negation in the dialectical sense, a negation of its being-in-itself as an object for others. Here, a solution arises: self-consciousness may attain a perpetual state of self-certainty not through negation of an object, but through another self-consciousness', another *subject's*, self-negation.

Now, as we have observed, self-consciousness negates itself in the dialectical sense as an object when it negates an object in the world. In order for a self-consciousness to be perpetually recognized, another self-consciousness must negate itself in the dialectical sense not as an object, but as a subject. In so doing, the self-negating self-consciousness is deprived of its sovereignty over its immediate world and recognizes the other as a subject. This occurs because, when self-consciousness surrenders its sovereignty, it recognizes that there are other self-consciousnesses, other subjects, like it, who share and inhabit the same world. The psychological state necessary for this recognition, then, requires that a self-consciousness not perceive itself as a sovereign subject over its immediate world; rather, self-consciousness must perceive itself as a universal being for another.

Knowing now the psychological state that is necessary for recognition, we may envisage our ultimate goal in this discussion as that which Hegel calls Spirit, “this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.”¹ However, with the current psychological state of self-consciousness we are examining, recognition among self-consciousnesses will be impossible upon their first encounter since the first psychological state permits self-consciousness to perceive what is beyond it only as objects. Thus, an entirely *new* psychological state must be formed after their initial encounter.

§ 2.1 – The Life and Death Struggle

With a firm grasp of the first psychological state that two self-consciousnesses will engage each other, let us observe their initial encounter. When I² first perceive another self-consciousness, I notice that he acts upon the world according to desire, just as I do. Despite its actions as a subject, I still view the other as an object due to my psychological state. As Hegel explains,

What is ‘other’ for it is an unessential, negatively characterized object. But the ‘other’ is also a self-consciousness; one individual is confronted by another individual. Appearing thus immediately on the scene, they are for one another like ordinary objects, *independent* shapes.³

Since I view the other as an object, I do not know that the other is capable of self-negation, and so I also do not know that the other presents an opportunity for me to achieve perpetual self-certainty. In the struggle, I seek to negate the other in order to be reflected back into myself as a being-for-self. However, in this case, if I kill the other, I will only be recognized in a vanishing

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by AV Miller, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 110.

² To more easily demonstrate the desires of a self-consciousness, I will take on the role of one of the self-consciousnesses.

³ *Ibid.*, 113.

moment as I would if I negated a non-autonomous object and my opportunity to achieve perpetual self-certainty would, unknowingly to me, be lost in the other's death. Further, I am not willing to recognize the other because, in my current psychological state, doing so implies a loss of my essence as the sovereign subject of my immediate world. As such, in my desire to be perpetually recognized, the other must negate itself, otherwise I will kill him and only be fleetingly recognized. How will self-negation manifest in this struggle?

In the encounter, we see two self-consciousnesses who seek to negate their objective being-for-others by revealing that they are not attached to anything outside themselves in the world, thus *staking their lives* to be recognized. Further, we see two self-consciousnesses who seek to kill each other for recognition. In effect, what ensues is a life and death struggle which neither self-consciousness can escape. I, as the other self-consciousness does as well, *must* pursue the death of the other in order to negate my being-for-others and establish myself as a being-for-self. At the same time, I *must* stake my life in the process to present myself as a being-for-self. During the struggle, one self-consciousness must experience the possibility of death and realize that its life is more important than its being-for-self. Thus, he surrenders, becoming the slave while the other becomes the master.

§ 3 – Morality in the Womb: The Second Psychological State

The development of the second psychological state now finds its foundations upon the conclusion of the life and death struggle. In the slave's submission to the master during the struggle, the slave effectively relinquished his being-for-self through recognizing the master's being-for-self. The slave must now experience a transformation of his psychological state, to be fashioned in the ensuing enslavement of the slave by the master.

It appears, then, that the master, upon being recognized by the slave as a being-for-self, seems to have achieved his desire of perpetual self-certainty. However, still in the first psychological state, the master perceives the slave merely as another object in the world. Because of this, the slave's recognition does not bring the master to full self-certainty. It is for this reason that the master forces the slave to act as an intermediary between himself and the world, so that the master may continue to negate objects and recognize himself through the objects instead of the slave. This, then, forces the master into a binding bond with the slave. The master will remain a being-for-self as long as the slave continues to recognize the master as such, which the slave will continue to do because of his acceptance of enslavement instead of death. The master's psychological state, then, need not change.

The slave, has, indeed, not achieved his desire of perpetual self-certainty as a direct result of the loss in the life and death struggle. The slave was recognized merely as an object rather than a subject by the master, and has recognized the master as the sovereign subject of a world the two share. As such, the slave no longer engages the world according to his desire, but for the master's. The slave, then, does not fully negate objects into non-existence, but rather partially negates objects as preparation for the master, who will enjoy the service by fully negating the object. An opportunity for the slave to achieve self-certainty arises in that he realizes his being shapes the being of the object he works on. The slave is able to exercise his power on the world and learns that his being is the essential being of the object.

We are now led to understand the slave's psychological transformation. We must notice that the entire operation of the slave is for another, for the master, even when the slave recognizes himself as a being-for-self in his work on objects. The slave is a being-for-self only as

long as he continues to partially negate objects for the master. However, this being-for-self is merely a by-product of the slave's primary purpose and not an end to which he strives. Let us recall that the slave accepted enslavement in order to stay alive; his enslavement requires that he negates his actions as a subject, and thus inhabit the world not for myself but for another, accomplished in his service for the other. As such, we may characterize the slave's psychological state as being-for-other.

We now know that an inability of recognition is the result of a self-consciousness' perception of another as an object rather than a subject. Further, we have observed that recognition is possible through the slave's psychological state. Though we have arrived at a point where an act of morality has become possible through the slave, the master was not recognized as a self-consciousness by the slave—the reason why the master forced the slave to partially negate objects for him, and achieve self-certainty through the objects instead of the slave. Further, we have not yet achieved a state of Spirit—history and the psychological state have not yet completed their evolutionary journeys. Our next task, then, will be to derive a successful event of recognition and a state of Spirit. To do this, we must observe the development of the psychological state through history. However, the master has ensured the impossibility of the slave to perceive itself as “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” while in a communion of self-consciousnesses.

To solve this, let us notice that an inability of recognition is also the result of one self-consciousness perceiving another as having a lower status than it. This is because, if a self-consciousness perceives itself as a subject, then it cannot perceive another as a subject as well; if it did, then that self-consciousness would no longer be a subject, since recognizing another

self-consciousness as a subject implies a negation of itself as a subject. As such, this self-consciousness may only perceive others as objects and engage them as objects. Therefore, a self-consciousness with the master's mentality (first psychological state) cannot perceive another as having an equal status as it. For recognition to be possible, a self-consciousness must perceive others as subjects that share and inhabit the same world. Thus, we must now observe the engagement of two self-consciousnesses with the slave mentality—two self-consciousnesses, then, able to recognize each other as subjects, as two of equal status.

§ 4 – The Birth of Morality: The Third and Final Psychological State

Now, let us consider the engagement of two self-consciousnesses, both with the slave's mentality. If I⁴ engage another self-consciousness with the slave's psychological state, I will perceive the other as a subject, as a being-for-self. Consequently, I am now a being-for-other. In this process, the moment I see the other as a self-consciousness, I negate myself as a subject and come to his service as a slave would to a master, reacting responsibly to my perception of the other as a subject.

In perceiving the other as such, I see that the other, also engaging me with the slave's psychological state, is simultaneously doing as I do. In Hegel's words,

Each sees the *other* do the same as it does; each does itself what it demands of the other, and therefore also does what it does only in so far as the other does the same. Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both.⁵

In this double movement, I perceive the other as a sovereign subject in our shared world; the same occurs for the other in perceiving me. Unlike the master and the slave, we both perceive

⁴ For a clearer understanding, I will pose as one of the self-consciousnesses once more in this encounter.

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by AV Miller, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 112.

each other as two of equal status, each as a sovereign subject, thus allowing us to recognize each other as self-consciousnesses.

From this, we are now led to understand this transformation of the psychological state. When two self-consciousnesses engage each other with the slave mentality, each self-consciousness is recognized both as a being-for-self, having already entered the engagement as a being-for-other. Thus, self-consciousness has achieved a psychological state where it perceives itself both as a particular being for itself and as a universal being for another. We must notice that this third psychological state is achieved only when one self-consciousness is in relation with another self-consciousness. The mutual negation of themselves as sovereign subjects in the world is not simply a recognition of the other as having a higher status. In this context, I do not fear that the other might kill me if I do not negate myself and recognize the other, as it was with the slave and the master. Rather, mutual negation indicates the most fundamental awareness of the other as being constitutive of each other's essence. Through the other, both self-consciousnesses are able to realize themselves fully as they are—as subjects and objects in the world.

§ 5 – Conclusion

From the most basic phenomenological experience of the world in the encounter of another self-consciousness to a subsequent psychological transformation in enslavement, self-consciousness lost itself as a subject and regained it through another—the effect of history's tending toward Spirit has unfolded in the relation of two self-consciousnesses. The slave mentality has not only made recognition possible; it also permits an accomplishment of *mutual* recognition. The consequence? The realization of a self-consciousness—through another's

recognition—as “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’.” The ultimate self-consciousness, which Hegel envisaged as a “universal individual,”⁶ now stands before us in full view. With the slave mentality, the morality of Spirit evokes the ultimate psychological state, manifest as both being-for-self and being-for-other—the *synthesis* of the two antithetic states of the master-slave dialectic.

⁶ Ibid., 16.