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reality and the slave

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel puts forth “one of the most powerful images in the history of philosophy” (Kohn 497). He sees the “self-conscious” through a relationship between a master and a slave. The story of the consciousness is not philosophically or realistically “peaceful” -- it is violent.

In this essay, I examine Hegel’s master/slave dialectic and explicate the relationship between the lord and the bondsman. Though it could be argued that the master/slave dialectic is simply a mechanism or “way” to show how consciousnesses free themselves, I contest this notion and instead show the reality of the slave. Using both Hegel’s own words and the words of those who have studied him, I first provide a close reading of the master/slave dialectic, then I establish the insufficiency of Hegel’s argument, and finally, I attempt to disprove my own findings regarding the deficiency of Hegel’s text. I seek to show that true recognition and absolute freedom do not exist for the slave in reality because she does not experience “freedom” under her own conditions.

Hegel tells the story of the self-consciousness. He tells this story using two characters, the master and the slave. The self-consciousness is on a quest for true recognition and absolute freedom. Hegel first establishes the motives of the individual consciousness. He says that the self-consciousness seeks understanding and wants to create a true reality for itself by experiencing the satisfaction of desire. “Desire and the

self-certainty obtained in its gratification...and it must experience its satisfaction, for it is the truth” (Hegel 109). This satisfaction of desire equals truth, for Hegel. He now identifies the importance of the other in the satisfaction of desire. “*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*” (Hegel 110). Here, it is only possible to find “truth” in the relationship between two individuals or consciousnesses. Hegel says that the satisfaction of desire occurs when the self-consciousness is acknowledged and recognized by an other. He asserts that both the “self” and the “other” have a sort of symbiotic relationship, for they must recognize each other in order to achieve true freedom and absolute truth. “They *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another” (Hegel 112). The actions of both individuals matter. However, as soon as Hegel introduces this idea, he says that there is an inherent inequality between the two beings. It is here where Hegel *really* begins his master/slave dialectic and tells the tale of lordship and bondage.

Hegel introduces a struggle of life and death between the two individuals, who later become either master and slave, or lord and bondsman. Hegel says that through this fight, the individual consciousness becomes free. “They must engage in this struggle, for they must raise their certainty of being *for themselves* to truth, both in the case of the other and in their own case. And it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won...” (Hegel 114). He says that death is the absolute loss of life and consciousness and true recognition occurs for the abstract consciousness in the staking of its life. Life, now, is the essence of the self-consciousness. Here, Hegel exemplifies each character or consciousness as either master or slave. “...one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent

consciousness whose essential nature is to simply live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman” (Hegel 115). The master, Hegel says, dominates the slave. In this power-over relationship, the master takes away the slave’s independence. Here, the lord satisfies himself in the experience of the bondsman by forcing the bondsman to work for the the lord’s independence. This is how, Hegel says, the lord understands his true freedom. “In both of these moments the lord achieves his recognition through another consciousness... The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal” (Hegel 116). In this unequal relationship, the master receives his truth from his satisfaction of the slave. The lord is only for himself.

Even though the slave is, as Hegel says, the “truth” of the master, the slave does not realize this. Hegel says that this is because of the slave’s fear of death. He asserts that the work the slave does because of her fear of death informs her of who she really is. Hegel repeatedly uses language of action and movement to emphasize the workers realization. “Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets ride of it by working on it... Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is” (Hegel 117-118). Hegel says that this work is a formative activity that creates an existence for the slave. “Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains at the formal stage, and does not extend to the known real world of existence. Without the formative activity, fear remains *in-for-itself*” (Hegel 119). The slave only becomes for herself when she is forced to work and has a fear of death.

Does Hegel’s slave *really* feel freedom and *really* think in- and for- herself? No. Even if, according to Hegel, the slave realizes her freedom, her perception of herself is

not forced upon her master. Alexandre Kojève's text, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, provides a useful deconstruction of Hegel's argument in less complex and, well, less abstract terms. In his analysis of the master, Kojève says that the master really proves his superiority.

“This superiority, at first purely *ideal*, which consists in the mental fact of being recognized and of knowing that he is recognized as Master by the Slave, is *realized* and materialized through the Slave's *Work*. The Master, who was able to force the Slave to *recognize* him as Master, can also force the Slave to *work* for him, to yield the result of his *Action* to him” (Kojève 45-46)

The slave is, in *reality*, proving and exemplifying the supremacy of her master for she is working. Here, Kojève also indicates the importance of real force in Hegel's argument.

The way Hegel employs terms of action, again, connects his text to reality. The slave has not just simply decided to affirm her master's freedom, but she was forced to do so.

Though Kojève now acknowledges Hegel's argument of abstract, intellectual, or mental freedom for the slave, he questions the nature and reality of the actual *work* of the slave. The slave's mental freedom can actually be contested here, as well. Kojève explicates forced work and mental freedom:

“To be sure, the slave properly so-called this *notion* of Freedom does not yet correspond to a true *reality*. He frees himself mentally only thanks to *forced work*, only because he is the Slave of a Master. And he *remains* in fact this Slave. Thus he frees himself, so to speak, only to be a Slave freely, to be still more a Slave than he was before having formed the *idea* of Freedom” (Kojève 49)

Not only does the freedom of the slave emerge from force, this “mental freedom” only serves to reaffirm the slave's powerless position. In addition to the fact that she is still in chains, the slave's position has been affirmed by her own freedom of thought! The master, in this case, is in reality, free, according to Kojève, while the slave only experiences an abstract freedom. “To realize it, he must make it recognized by a *Slave*,

he must transform whoever is to recognize it into a *Slave*... His freedom, to be sure, is recognized... If...the Slave's freedom is recognized by no one but himself...it is purely *abstract*..." (Kojève 50). Even though the master's freedom is only realized and made true by a slave, he is still, essentially, free. Kojève suggests that the only way for the slave to become in reality free is for her to forcefully impose her freedom on her master. "Therefore, it is sufficient for him to impose his liberty on the Master in order to attain...that *mutual* Recognition... In order to do this, he must fight against the Master... he must cease to be a Slave... He must become *other* than what he *is*" (Kojève 50). The slave's only way to be truly recognized is to overcome her existence as a slave. In order to become absolutely free, the slave must *use* the same force her master used upon her.

My argument that considers the reality of the slave is easily refutable. In essence, all one needs to say is that the master/slave dialectic is a *way* to understand the relationship between individual consciousnesses. Perhaps Hegel's use of the "master" and the "slave" is simply an exaggerated method constructed to aid in his understanding of the relationships between individuals. This argument assumes a major rereading. Other counter-arguments say that there really *is* a mutual recognition between the lord and the bondsman, for the bondsman *chose* his life of bondage over death. One could also assert that Hegel's proposition for the emancipation of the slave is only a first step towards a greater "freedom" (Kohn and Kojève). Kojève also poses a more modern and somewhat Marxist interpretation of the dialectic, saying that the bourgeois "is his own slave" (Kojève 69). My argument placed the master/slave

relationship in a reality of slavery, but it is now evident that this is only one, isolated, and quite insufficient reading of Hegel.

Aside from my project of relating the “slave” to an immediate reality that I understood, my greater purpose for arguing this was to conduct an exposition on the master and the slave. I made my argument to aid my own understanding of the lord and the bondsman. I argued that the slave is unable to achieve true recognition and absolute freedom in *reality*. I took an isolated piece of text out of its greater context and examined it within a “real” world setting. Is the slave actually able to free herself? Is her, or our, rather, power of mind really that great?

works cited

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