

Remarks on Hegel's Master-Servant* Relation

Andy Blunden, January 2018

Some interpretations of Hegel take as their point of departure the master-servant relation, §§178-196 of the *Phenomenology*. Very broadly speaking, those who take this relation (and possibly the *Phenomenology* altogether) as their essential Hegel and those who take the *Logic* (and possibly also the *Philosophy of Right*) as their essential Hegel form two almost mutually exclusive schools of thought. What is special about the master-servant relation is that it is an apparently *unmediated* relation lacking any third party to mediate between the protagonists. By contrast, the *Logic* is all about mediation, beginning from the observation that “There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.” There is hardly a passage of the *Logic* in which the problem of mediation does not figure, and this is equally true of those 19 paragraphs of the *Phenomenology*.

The master-servant dialectic makes its first appearance in Hegel's first sketch of his system in 1802/3, *The System of Ethical Life*, in which it features *twice* (both in the case of the formation of a state, and in the case of employer-employee relations). It reaches its most extended exposition in the *Phenomenology* in 1807, where it takes the form of a foundation myth, intended as a parody of state-of-nature narratives like those of Rousseau and Hobbes. Subsequently, a much attenuated version is relegated to Hegel's Psychology, within the *Subjective Spirit* section of the *Encyclopaedia*, where it is embedded within the intricate structure representing the formation of self-consciousness. Some other aspects are dealt with in the *Objective Spirit*, as well.

In the *Subjective Spirit*, the successive episodes of the master-servant narrative in the *Phenomenology* – Stoicism, Scepticism, Unhappy consciousness – are absent. Instead, we have a finely graded structure representing the formation of self-consciousness: Consciousness proper, Self-consciousness (Appetite, Self-consciousness recognitive, universal self-consciousness), Reason. Hegel remarks here:

“To prevent any possible misunderstandings with regard to the standpoint just outlined, we must here remark that the fight for recognition pushed to the extreme here indicated can only occur in the natural state, where men exist only as single, separate individuals; but it is absent in civil society and the State because here the recognition for which the combatants fought already exists. For although the State may originate in violence, it does not rest on it; violence, in producing the State, has brought into existence only what is justified in and of itself, namely laws and a constitution. What dominates in the State is the spirit of the people, custom and law.” (§432)

The *Phenomenology* was Hegel's first published book, composed at a time when his ideas were still in gestation, and written in a rush to meet the publisher's deadlines. Only 250 copies were printed during Hegel's lifetime – he used to give copies as presents to friends. At the time of his death, 25 years later, Hegel had been working on a second edition of the *Phenomenology*, but had written on the manuscript: “Characteristic early work not to be revised – relevant to the period at which it was written ...” The *Phenomenology* and Hegel's earlier work are important for understanding how to read Hegel's later works, especially his *Logic*, but in this writer's

* Rather than ‘slave’ (*Sklave*), I translate *Knecht* as ‘servant’. Either word is possible, but ‘servant’ is the more common meaning of *Knecht* and better corresponds to Hegel's usage, which does not include the complete cancellation of the subjectivity of the *Knecht* and extends to feudal bondage.

view, they are immature representatives of Hegel's thought, which have been superseded by his mature works.

The master-servant relation is about how two subjects, lacking any third party, common language or system of law to mediate between them, who still somehow manage to mediate their relation. The mediating element in this extreme case is the Servant's labour, which meets the desire of the Master. This can be expressed in terms of two subject-objects confronting one another, each *duplicated* by the separation of subjectivity and objectivity; the subjectivity (desires) of one subject (the master) mediates between the objectivity and subjectivity of the other ('delayed gratification' by the servant) while the objectivity of the servant (the servant's labour) mediates between the master's needs and their satisfaction (its objectivity). The servant's needs are modified and met within the activity of the master subject-object.

Thus by the separation of the once-immediate relation between needs and their satisfaction by a division of labour in which the labour of one subject is directed by another subject, who appropriates a surplus, relations or material interdependence are created. But these relations of mutual dependence are created on the basis of the forceful subordination of one subject by another. In the later exposition, the title is retained but the narrative form is gone along with the drama of the earlier version.

In the absence of some system of norms, unless a subject has some surplus product which another subject needs, then there is no basis for any relationship between them. In the event that two such subjects were to come across one another, either one would exterminate the other, or they would recoil from one another and peacefully go their own way. Right (property relations and a customary or formal system of law) then replaces relations of force on the foundation of this mutual interdependence of subjects. Thus, whereas Rousseau asked "How is that man is born free but is everywhere in chains?" Hegel showed that, on the contrary, that although human beings are inherently free, the state begins with slavery and human beings become free only through the perfection of states, states which mediate the relations of person to person and foster the development of individuals.

How it happened

Until Alexander Kojève gave his lectures on Hegel to students at the *École des hautes études* in Paris, 1931-1939, no-one had made any interpretation of the master-servant relation at all. Marx mentions it in 3 words in a table of contents of the *Phenomenology* in his 1844 Manuscripts, and that is as far as anyone went in "interpreting" these 18 paragraphs. Beyond the ranks of professional Hegel scholars it was quite unknown until Kojève's lectures were published in 1947. French speakers knew Hegel only via a very poor translation of the *Encyclopaedia* by the Italian, Augusto Vera, which resulted in a distinct lack of interest in Hegel among French speakers. Internationally, all the attention of Hegel scholars had been directed at the *Logic* and the *Encyclopædia*, and among specialist readers, the Philosophy of History, History of Philosophy, Religion and the Aesthetics. In the English-speaking world, Hegel was known exclusively through the *Logic*. Almost no-one read the *Phenomenology*. In 1947, France was facing national liberation movements as it struggled to recover its colonies in North Africa and Asia, so with Kojève's lectures and the publication of Hyppolite's excellent French translation of the *Phenomenology*, we can see how Hegel caught the interest of French-speakers. Thanks to Kojève, suddenly everyone wanted to read the master-servant narrative. Since 1947, this highly eccentric passage which is very uncharacteristic of Hegel became the touchstone of French philosophy, and then spread to the world, to such an extent that today, even many educated people still think that Hegel was a person who had a theory about a master-

slave relationship. Hegel scholars know this is a myth, but the strength of the myth is such that it is difficult to dispel. Familiarity with the master-servant narrative is a *sine qua non* for admission to polite philosophical society. And the mythology does not stop at Hegel. Thanks to Marcuse and others, the idea established itself that Karl Marx had built his theory on the master-servant dialectic. This is utterly untrue. Marx hardly knew the passage existed. Likewise, a myth has been created that Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) modelled his Psychology on the master-servant dialectic, though it is certain that Vygotsky knew nothing of this work.

Nonetheless, there is good reason for the master-servant dialect having become popular in post-War France and for the growth of interest in it in following decades. The relation between a colonial power (such as France) and an emergent post-colonial consciousness among the colonised people is exactly represented in the master-servant dialect, insofar as international law and institutions are absent or ineffective in these conflicts. When the colonialist arrives on the shores of a foreign land, the culture, language and religion of the colony (their subjectivity) are invisible to the colonialists and simply destroyed, just as if the indigenous people were wild animals, but the land and labour of the colonised (their objectivity) is subordinated by the coloniser and transformed into an objectification of their own needs. This results in a kind of dual personality for those who are colonised, and the struggle to overcome this can be seen in terms of the master-servant narrative.

The master-slave dialectic may reflect the experience of subordinated groups in a state when they put forward their claim for recognition, such as in the case of the feminists and other identity claims. However, the effectiveness of the master-servant relation in shedding light on the trajectory of a social movement (such as the workers' movement, the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Movement and the Environmental Movement) is more than questionable. These movements worked within a system of law in which the individuals concerned had rights and such movements have invariably sought to use the courts in prosecuting their aims. These movements have sought to transform this system of law by embedding a new concept within the dominant culture. This is not what happens in the master-servant narrative. It is in the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Right* that we find a conceptual foundation for understanding how a state can be transformed by a radical subject which challenges its norms.

See also:

[Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic and a Myth of Marxology](#), by Chris Arthur.

[Master and Servant](#), Hegel, in the *Phenomenology*, 1807

[Self-consciousness](#), Hegel, in the *Subjective Spirit*, 1817

By Andy Blunden:

[Hegel's Psychology](#), 2011

[Hegel on "state of nature"](#), 2007

[From where did Vygotsky get his Hegelianism?](#) 2009

[Masters, Servants and Mediation](#), 2007

[Hegel and the Master-Servant Dialectic](#): Commentary, 2007