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The Master's Problem: Revisiting Hegel's Critique of Social Domination

Stephen Cunniff

Department of Philosophy, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

Correspondence
Email: scunniff@uchicago.edu

Abstract

This paper argues for a reinterpretation of Hegel's internal critique of the master in his famous 'Master–Slave Dialectic.' Hegel argues that, in addition to the evident injustice suffered by the enslaved, the arrangement also undermines the master's own purposes. Standard interpretations claim either that the unequal relation frustrates the master's desire for the other's recognition, or that he depends upon the slave in a manner that contradicts his supposed independence. I argue that these readings are both textually ungrounded and philosophically unsatisfying. The critiques they advance rely upon inadequate conceptions of relations of domination. Instead, Hegel's account turns on the way the means-end structure of mastery is ultimately self-conflicting. Drawing on Aristotle's idea that the master–slave relation is the consummate exemplar of a user-tool relation, Hegel presents mastery as the pursuit of the unconstrained power embodied in the complete control over a 'living tool.' Yet precisely because mastery itself becomes the master's highest end, he thereby assigns absolute value to a possession simultaneously regarded as a mere means—his slave. Thus, like King Midas, the inner demands of the master's domineering will can only be realized in the shape of something he himself views as a contemptible means.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Hegel's famous 'Master–Slave Dialectic' offers an internal critique of the conception of personal freedom embodied in the direct domination of another. The social relation he considers is one founded upon the so-called 'right of conquest,' in which the victor of a mortal struggle agrees to spare the defeated party on the condition that he submit to a life of servitude. The ensuing hierarchy provides the master a permanent means for satisfying his needs and desires without labor or toil, for the hard work of executing his will has been imposed upon another. A privileged existence indeed. But Hegel argues that, apart from the evident injustice suffered by the enslaved, the arrangement in fact fails to fulfill the master's own purposes. The master's very freedom, he claims, is compromised by its dependence upon the bondage of another.

The focus of this article is Hegel's analysis of the master's problem. That analysis is not, of course, an isolated argument. It is intended to reveal something about a certain form of self-consciousness, and this result is meant to serve a particular function within the notoriously complex project of the *Phenomenology* as a whole. This context raises important and difficult questions concerning the broader implications of Hegel's analysis of the master—questions that have arguably attracted more scholarly attention than any other part of Hegel's work. But the answer to those questions depends upon a correct understanding of Hegel's analysis itself. My claim is that his all-too-familiar treatment of the master has not been well understood.[1]

Indeed, the very familiarity of Hegel's conclusions about the master tends to obscure the immense ambition of his argument—an ambition which, I will argue, is left unfulfilled by the standard reconstructions of his critique. This ambition lies, above all, in the form of internal criticism Hegel adopts. For Hegel, the life of the master is the embodiment of a certain subjective ideal of existing purely for oneself. It goes without saying that this form of life fails to satisfy the higher standards of morality and true social justice. But if that were the master's *only* problem, and if he were nonetheless able to fully satisfy his own self-interest, then it seems we should be forced to concede something to the cynical view of Plato's Thrasymachus—namely, that the demands of social justice are, at base, simply the demands of subjecting one's own interest to the good of another. In other words, social justice would seem to be merely another form of social subservience. The seductive power of this form of cynicism has, of course, remained quite formidable in our own time, and its very concept makes it impervious to moralistic criticism. But by giving an *internal* critique, Hegel's argument purports to show that the direct instrumentalization of others is in fact opposed to one's own individual freedom and self-interest. In this way, Hegel does not simply repudiate the underlying desire to exist for oneself. Rather, his claim is that this very desire can only be satisfied through relations of genuine mutuality and reciprocity with others.

A powerful view. But as often happens in such cases, the attractiveness of Hegel's conclusion has, I suggest, tended to lead scholars to overly simplistic and ultimately unsatisfying explanations of it. Indeed, according to the standard reconstructions of his critique, the master's situation appears to be so transparently opposed to his own aims and his own self-conception that—if this were true—it should be a great mystery that relations of domination have existed for so long and been sustained by so many otherwise clever people. In view of such analyses, more critical minds may be inclined toward a version of Sartre's complaint—namely, that Hegel's position rests upon an unrealistic philosophical optimism.[2] My argument in this paper is that Hegel's critique is far subtler than it is normally taken to be and that this is the source of its strength.

Two approaches to Hegel's account predominate in the literature. One centers on a certain understanding of the issue of social recognition that lies at the heart of that chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Hegel characterizes the life-and-death struggle from which the master emerges as a struggle for *recognition*. In some sense, Hegel clearly thinks that the victor-turned-master does not ultimately gain what he was after in that original struggle. On a common reading of that view, the master's problem is that the recognition he sought is made worthless by the very fact that it is obtained through the coercive subjugation of the other. I'll call this the 'Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading.'[3] The second, equally common reconstruction of Hegel's critique claims that the master's self-ascribed independence

is undermined by the fact that his status and livelihood are ultimately dependent upon another—the slave.[4] I'll call this the 'Unconscious Dependence Reading.'[5]

I argue that the apparent plausibility of these conceptions of the master's problem rests upon a conflation of the relevant forms of recognition and dependency with alternative forms that do not properly characterize the matter at hand. As philosophical views in their own right, these analyses unwittingly rely upon a naive conception of the kind of recognition a master is after and the kind of power relations that define who is truly dependent upon whom. Hegel's critique, I argue, is more clear-eyed about the situation. Contrary to the standard readings, for Hegel, the master gets precisely the recognition he wants, and he is, in an important sense, precisely who he takes himself to be. But that is the source of his deeper problem.

On the interpretation I will defend, Hegel's analysis of the master's problem may be outlined as follows. For the master, the slave is a mere means, but he is also the perfect means, the absolute tool—the "*organon pro organon*," as Aristotle puts it (*Politics* 1253b30). In this way, the master views the *ends* of that relationship as the various gratifications he enjoys by means of the other's work. But Hegel's claim is that, at base, what really holds ultimate value for the master is not these individual gratifications, but the complete personal power manifested in his standing ability to satisfy his capricious will without even needing to personally execute it. In other words, his most precious *end* is his own mastery. But just as 'being a parent' and 'having a child' are synonymous, so does the master's highest aim coincide with his possession and use of slaves—which, for him are at the same time a mere means. His problem, therefore, is akin to that of the miser or of King Midas. His attempt to fulfill his unrestrained self-interest can only be realized in the reduction of everything to a mere means. In the servitude of another, he achieves this goal in the most complete way possible. But in this way, the realization of his very attempt to exist *for himself* is the possession and use of what he himself regards merely as a contemptible means.

My argument is given in four parts. In section two, I give a brief summary of the immediate context of Hegel's treatment of mastery and servitude in the "Self-Consciousness" chapter of the *Phenomenology*. In section three, I examine the standard reconstructions of Hegel's critique of the master and argue that they fail both exegetically and as arguments in their own right. In section four, I argue that Hegel's treatment of the master–slave relation must be viewed as a kind of paradigm of Hegel's understanding of the user-tool relationship more generally. In section five, I argue that the master's problem lies precisely in the fact that his attempt to fulfill the freedom of unrestrained self-interest results in contradictorily investing ultimate value in another subject *qua mere means*.

2 | THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF HEGEL'S ARGUMENT

2.1 | Self-Consciousness and *Selbstständigkeit*

The primary aim of this paper is not to defend a comprehensive interpretation of the "Self-Consciousness" chapter of the *Phenomenology*, in which Hegel's 'Master–Slave Dialectic' appears, nor to engage in a detailed analysis of the developments that precede his account of the master–slave relation. Such an undertaking would extend beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Nevertheless, a brief outline of the sections leading up to Hegel's analysis of the relation of master and slave will help clarify the context of that account.

The *Phenomenology*'s "Self-Consciousness" chapter begins with a discussion of desire—specifically, with an account of a kind of 'self-certainty' that is affirmed by satisfying one's immediate desires through the outright destruction and consumption of an erstwhile independent natural object.[6] Here, as in the remainder of that chapter, the primary sense of 'self-consciousness' is not merely that of self-awareness in general (for instance, the capacity for 'I-thoughts') but concerns a subject's attempt to give proof to the inner certainty of its own independence or *Selbstständigkeit* (literally, 'self-standingness'). That is, Hegel's chapter examines the way in which a subject shows itself not merely to be conscious of an independent external world but also of *itself* as a genuinely 'self-standing' being *within* the world.[7] His claim is that, in immediate desire and its satisfaction, the certainty of one's independence

is validated in the most basic way: through the direct demonstration of one's power over external things and one's ability to subject them to one's own self-directed existence.

The notion of *Selbstständigkeit* that governs the theme of that chapter carries the important ontological connotation of *substantiality*. In his lectures on Spinoza, Hegel glosses Spinoza's definition of substance as "*das schlechthin Selbstständige*"—"the purely self-standing" (VGP II 2020, 715).[8] In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel uses the language of "living substance" (PhG 1977, ¶18) to characterize the *being* of a subject as such, and in his famous passage about the 'I that is We,' he describes *Geist* as "this absolute substance" (PhG 1977, ¶177). As applied to the life of a self-aware subject, the term *Selbstständigkeit* also carries the more specific meaning of 'self-sufficiency,' and in his lectures on Aristotle's *Politics*, Hegel uses it to render Aristotle's *autarkeia* (VGP III 2020, 1116).

The concept of 'self-sufficiency' thus introduced in Hegel's treatment of desire is characterized by an internal teleological structure closely connected to the concept of life generally. That is, it concerns a subject's capacity to exist *for itself*—to view itself as an *end* and to fulfill its internal purposes through effective action in the world. In immediate desire-satisfaction, we thus find the most rudimentary (and ultimately the most limited) example of Hegel's seemingly arcane conception of freedom and its corresponding form of self-consciousness: 'being with oneself in another,' 'finding oneself in one's object.'[9] That is, in *devouring* my object, I give the most basic form of demonstration that the object is no real constraint to me but absolutely conforms to myself and my purposes, for it literally becomes one with me.

As I will argue below, this notion of *Selbstständigkeit* as a kind of unconstrained self-fulfillment is in fact never abandoned in Hegel's account but only further developed and transformed. It is the kind of independence the master aims to enjoy and *does* enjoy in a certain sense.[10] But Hegel's claim will be that the master's life ultimately contains an abiding *constraint* to his own self-interest, and we will have to see why.

2.2 | The Struggle for Recognition and the Establishment of Lordship

Following his initial discussion of desire, Hegel goes on to argue that this form of certifying one's own independence is ultimately specious and unsatisfying. He claims that its problem can only be overcome through a different kind of action with a different corresponding *object*—namely, "another self-consciousness" (PhG 1977, ¶175). He characterizes that relationship as a certain form of *recognition*. For now, I will refrain from offering my own interpretation of that initial transition from desire to recognition, for its meaning is closely connected to Hegel's understanding of the 'master–slave' relation to be discussed shortly. I will return to the matter in section four.

Following a brief outline of the concept of recognition *in abstracto* (the "pure concept of recognition" (PhG 1977, ¶185)), Hegel examines the issue at a more concrete level by considering what he takes to be the most rudimentary form of a subject's attempt to substantiate its 'self-certainty' by means of another's recognition—namely, in a life-and-death struggle. He claims that the kind of struggle under consideration can only end in one of two ways: either in the death of one party (or both), or in the absolute submission of one to the other. Since the dead can neither give nor receive any form of recognition, Hegel claims that the only recognition to be gained from this struggle is the one-sided recognition achieved through the latter outcome—the defeated party's compulsion (on pain of death) to henceforth acknowledge the other as his master: "The one combatant prefers life, preserves his single self-consciousness, but surrenders his claim for recognition, while the other holds fast to his self-relation, and the first acknowledges his subjugation to him[11]—the *relation* of *mastery* and *servitude*" (EPS 1986, §433).

In the ensuing social hierarchy, the enslaved party is compelled to endure a life of forced labor, motivated by the standing threat the master poses to his very survival. The master, for his part, continues to enjoy the satisfaction of his own desires. But by contrast to the activity discussed in Hegel's initial account of desire, the master's fulfillment of his needs and desires no longer requires that he provide for himself through his own personal efforts. In this way, he is freed from the burden of directly and continually struggling with nature to satisfy his own ends, for someone

else is now compelled to perform that labor on his behalf. In short, he frees himself from the curse of Adam by binding another under its yoke.

But Hegel claims that, because his freedom rests on the bondage of another, "He [the master] is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-self* as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness [of the slave] and its unessential action" (PhG 1977, ¶192). As we will see, this idea that the 'truth' of the master is the life and action of the slave has several interconnected meanings, but an essential component is that the master is not truly free in his own right. His freedom is corrupted by the unfreedom of the other through which it is achieved: "The master confronted by his slave was not yet truly free, for he still did not fully behold himself in the other. Only when the slave becomes free does the master, consequently, become completely free as well" (EPS 1986, §436Z). But why, and in what sense, does Hegel think that the master is not truly free? And how is this problem connected to the one-sided recognition which defines the master–slave relation? To set the stage for answering these questions accurately, I will show that the standard answers are inadequate.

3 | INADEQUATE PERSPECTIVES ON THE MASTER'S PROBLEM

3.1 | The Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading

One of the most prevalent reconstructions of Hegel's argument is what I've called the 'Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading.' On this approach, the master's problem lies in his failure to truly obtain the recognition he desires from the slave. His very domination over the other guarantees that what he gains is nothing but the false appearance of the desired recognition. But because the master's conviction in his own independence rests upon that recognition, his very self-conception is as false and empty as the recognition on which it is based. Terry Pinkard expresses this problem as follows:

> If self-consciousness requires recognition by another self-conscious person, then the other person has to have the authority to bestow that recognition. [...] The master demands recognition from the slave while also refusing recognition of the slave as even having the status to confer such recognition at all. This in turn sets up a contradiction: The master requires recognition from somebody else who by the master's own doing cannot be authorized to bestow such recognition.
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> (Pinkard 2018, xxiii)

This is an appealing argument, but I will argue that it ultimately trades on an ambiguity in the notion of recognition. Of course, the term 'recognition' is used in many ways, and Hegel's account naturally raises the question of what kind of recognition the master is said to demand from the slave. Even proponents of the Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading do not all share the same answer to this question. Nonetheless, the common logic of the critique they ascribe to Hegel reveals a certain shared assumption about the kind of recognition the master is after. Examining that logic will allow us to determine the nature and validity of this assumption.

Two main factors are thought to invalidate the recognition won by the master. First, this recognition is not given *freely* but is obtained only by extortion under threat of death. The slave's recognition is supposed to give 'truth' to the master's 'self-certainty.' But, as Robert Williams writes, "in spite of his victory over the slave, the master remains uncertain of his own truth, precisely because the slave's recognition is coerced. [...] Although the slave can and does 'recognize' the master, his recognition, as slave, is deficient because it is coerced, and thus provides the master an unreliable, distorted recognition" (Williams 1997, 63). In short, the slave's recognition is worthless because it is insincere. The fact that it is coerced destroys its credibility and compromises its value of as a source of self-confirmation.[12]

Second, even if that recognition were sincere, its value to the recipient is said to diminish precisely in proportion to its one-sidedness. Neuhouser writes: "every act of recognition involves some degree of reciprocity (since my seeking recognition from you implies that I regard you as sufficiently worthy for your recognition to count)" (Neuhouser 2009, 49). The resulting problem appears to be precisely the kind of 'contradiction' that Pinkard identifies in the passage quoted above. For the master, the slave has no standing whatsoever. But for that very reason, any recognition the slave bestows upon him ought to be regarded as utterly worthless and irrelevant by the master himself. Neuhouser expresses the tension vividly: the master wants the other "to freely enact the attitude: you count for everything, I for nothing" (Neuhouser 2009, 49). The inner conflict in this desire is apparent. The slave must count for *something* if his 'you count for everything' is to be worth anything at all. But in that case, his attitude becomes plainly false. On pain of incoherence, the belief that 'I count for everything' cannot be genuinely validated through its acknowledgment by another. But such acknowledgement seems to be just what the master is after.

The core of this argument is as simple as it is elegant: the recognition the master desires can have no value at all unless it satisfies the following two conditions. It must (1) be freely and sincerely given by (2) someone whom the recipient himself recognizes as worthy to bestow it. Absent these conditions, it is reduced to a worthless and counterfeit currency. Since the recognition obtained by the master fails on both counts, the measure of his high self-appraisal turns out to be nothing but fool's gold.

This argument is certainly coherent; whether it is sound remains to be seen. The master, on Hegel's account, certainly demands some form of recognition, and the recognition he receives does not seem to satisfy the two conditions listed above. The question, however, is whether *all* forms of recognition are subject to those conditions and, specifically, whether the kind of recognition the master seeks from the slave internally depends on them. Let us examine the matter more closely.

For Hegel, the desired recognition involves something the parties to the 'life-and-death struggle' aim to prove to one another through combat. Namely, each seeks to demonstrate a form of independence by showing that concerns for mere life are not an absolute constraint to his actions. Importantly, Hegel stresses that the combatants' attitude toward natural life includes not only the willingness of each to risk his *own* life but also extends to the life of the other: "just as each stakes his own life, so each must seek the other's death, for it values the other no more than itself" (PhG 1977 ¶187). Indeed, in the *Encyclopaedia* "Phenomenology," Hegel removes any impression that these combatants are brazenly indifferent to their own lives. He even depicts their self-imperilment as a risk that each must assume *by* threatening the life of the other: "each of the two self-consciousnesses puts the other's life in danger [*Gefahr*], and incurs a like danger for his own—but only danger, for each is no less bent upon maintaining his life, as the existence of his freedom" (EPS 1986, ¶432). Neither wants to die, but the question is how far they are willing to risk their lives and whether they would sacrifice their freedom if survival depended on it.

Ultimately, the defeated party does surrender his freedom in exchange for his life, and so he relinquishes his claim to recognition. In doing so, he acknowledges the victor's ability to kill him and his unflinching willingness to stake both of their lives on his claim to unchecked freedom. To that extent, the defeated party's acknowledgement of the victor appears to be both sincere and valid. As a rule, the words of captives and hostages have little credibility when expressing an assessment of their captors. But this very rule entails an exception: a captive's claim that his captor is willing and able to take his life should he disobey. Thus, at a minimum, the slave in Hegel's account recognizes the master in two closely related ways: (1) he holds a well-established belief that the master will stop at nothing to get his way; and (2) he therefore *submits* to the master's will out of a well-founded fear for his own life. If this is the only kind of recognition the master is after, then he seems to get precisely what he wants.

The strength of the Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading depends on the assumption that the master desires something more than this. For Pinkard and Neuhouser, the master seeks recognition of his *authority*.[13] This way of framing the issue is shared by readers like Robert Pippin and Robert Brandom.[14] I agree that the master seeks recognition of a certain kind of authority. The question is what this desire involves and what kind of authority is at issue. 'Authority' is an ambiguous term. One can be an authority in the sense that one is a superlative and trustworthy *judge* on some matter (as a good chef is an authority on cooking). One can also have authority in the different sense

that one's decision on a matter is final—even (and especially) if one's subordinates disagree with it (as even a poor chef is the authority in his kitchen). These different senses of authority also involve different forms of recognition, and without disambiguating these terms, we are liable to conflate very different requirements.

The master certainly demands that the slave recognize his authority in the sense of his *rule*. To that extent, he demands that the slave adopt the practical maxim: 'what the master says goes.' Of course, the slave's adoption of that maxim does not imply that the *ground* of its adoption is a sincere endorsement of that principle. That would be recognition of the master's authority in the *other* sense as well. The slave might (and, in Hegel's account, does) adopt it out of legitimate fear for his own life. Now, if the recognition the master demands is only the slave's adoption of that maxim, then, as far as he is concerned, his authority is sufficiently recognized and his rule unchallenged so long as the slave reliably submits to his will *in practice*. On the other hand, if what the master really wants is the slave's honest endorsement of his rule—his *assent* to the master's will—then he certainly makes himself vulnerable to the kind of criticism we've been examining. When Neuhouser claims that the master wants the other "to freely enact the attitude: you count for everything, I for nothing," he appears to be describing the latter, extraordinary desire for recognition.[15]

But in that case, the kind of master we are envisioning appears to be quite exceptional. The fact that the typical master has no great qualms about the use of whips, chains, and other threats of violence strongly suggests that his concern lies primarily in the slave's *adoption* of a maxim of obedience—not in his sincere endorsement of it. In other words, the typical master seems to demand a different, more realistic form of recognition: deference to his will in practice, submission to his rule. If a master's Achilles' heel is only a desire to obtain a more extraordinary form of recognition, then the typical (and less delusional) master would seem to emerge unscathed.

In other words, the master's status *as master* seems to depend essentially on the more realistic form of recognition (submission to his rule). My claim is that, for Hegel, this is the kind of recognition he demands from the slave, and this is what he in fact obtains. But in order to advance this interpretive claim, I first want to show that the very logic of the critique articulated by the Self-Invalidated Recognition Reading depends upon an unwitting equivocation of the kind of recognition that in fact defines the master–slave relation with other forms of recognition that are extraneous to the interests of a master as such.

As we've seen, the core of that critique rests on the principle that the desired recognition is empty and worthless unless it is freely given by one whom its recipient deems worthy to bestow it. Now, if by 'recognition' we understand things like honor, endorsement, or affirmation—in a word, *approval*—then this principle certainly holds. We typically seek that recognition from respected peers and admired superiors. Why them? Because we trust their opinion and view them as exemplary judges of the values we strive to fulfill in our actions, judgments, and characters. By contrast, if one demands another's recognition in a very different sense—namely, deference to one's will in practice—then one's estimation of the other's point of view is a moot point (at least, it is not essential). Recognition in the latter sense is not merely the superficial appearance of recognition in the former sense but concerns an entirely different aim. It is not about winning esteem in the other's eyes but establishing the distinction between ruler and ruled. To demand that form of recognition is to require the kind of respect in which *fear* is not a contaminant but an essential component. That is the kind of respect on which the master's status depends.

The view that recognition achieved through domination is inherently self-undermining derives its apparent force from an ambiguity in the term 'recognition.' Insofar as a master is essentially interested in recognition in the one sense—i.e. the slave's submission to his rule in practice—he is completely indifferent to the slave's judgments, opinions, or approval. Of course, that is precisely the attitude which the ordinary master has toward a slave. But if we also suggest that the master desires the slave's recognition in the other sense—that he is concerned with the slave's estimation of him and evaluates himself accordingly—then clearly that attitude stands in direct contradiction to the master's utter contempt for the slave. However, once we carefully disambiguate the term, it becomes clear that this contempt does not conflict with the master's desire for recognition but is entirely consistent with the sort of recognition he requires. In short, when the master demands a '*Yes, sir*' from the slave, he is not after his opinion but only his trembling obedience.

Most importantly for our present purposes, Hegel himself insists upon this very point. Discussing the life-and-death struggle for recognition in his 1825 lectures on the *Philosophy of Spirit*, he describes the impulse that motivates this combat as a lust for domination, "*der Trieb der Herrschsucht*" (VPG I 2008, 468). He thus characterizes the sought-after recognition as follows:

> This recognition is not merely about honor [*Ehre*], the recognition in the opinion [*Vorstellung*] of the other, for just as one's immediate individuality remains [in this struggle] undistinguished from one's independence [*Selbstständigkeit*], so does opinion. Rather, the man must be recognized in the whole [of his] existence. But here, being recognized has to do with the relation in which I am the master and he is the slave and so must serve me in that way.
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> (VPG I 2008, 468)

In other words, Hegel's claim is that the kind of independence one seeks to affirm through direct force over another is one that is completely unseparated from one's individual power and self-interest (one's 'immediate individuality'). It is a matter of unbounded license and the willingness to go to any length to assert it. But to recognize *that* kind of independence is simply to submit to the other's superior strength and force of will. That is the kind of recognition the conqueror-turned-master demands from the subjugated, and that is the kind of recognition he gets.

As a final note on this point, one of the benefits of this reading is that it allows us to see how Hegel can view the master–slave relation in terms of recognition without having to impute to the master any extraordinary or implausible interests in the other's validation. Indeed, if our aim is to see that what the master gains from the slave is ultimately unsatisfying to him, it seems we should do so in a manner that does not rely on the assumption that the master is interested in anything other than the power and privilege typical of that status.

3.2 | The Unconscious Dependence Reading

In his famous opening to *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. There are some who may believe themselves masters of others, and are no less enslaved than they" (Rousseau 1999, 46). One of the most common readings of Hegel's critique of the master is a striking variation on the last part of this Rousseauian line. It is the view that the master, while believing himself to be wholly independent, is in fact completely dependent upon another (the slave). I've called this the 'Unconscious Dependence Reading.'

Walter Kaufmann explains this "neat and ironical reversal" in terms of material self-reliance: "The servant comes to live by his own work and thus becomes self-reliant and independent, while the master comes to rely upon the servant's labor and thus becomes dependent" (Kaufmann 1978, 137). Others have expressed this argument in even starker conceptual terms—identifying, as Hyppolite puts it, a "contradiction inherent in the state of domination." He explains: "The master is master only because he is recognized by the slave; his autonomy depends on the mediation of another self-consciousness, that of the slave. Thus, his independence is completely relative" (Hyppolite 1974, 173). Judith Shklar combines the two points: "[The master] thinks that he is perfectly autonomous, but in fact he relies utterly upon his slave, not only to satisfy all his desires, but for his identity. Without slaves he is no master" (Shklar 1976, 61).[16] Now, there is no question that the master, qua master, depends upon the slave for this identity, and the master also satisfies his needs and desires through the other's work. But does that really undermine the master's own claim, and is that really Hegel's take on the matter?

Mastery is, of course, a relational status and, like any relational identity, it is dependent upon the other relatum. Aristotle himself uses the example of master and slave to illustrate the category of relation: "All relatives are spoken of in relation to correlatives that reciprocate. For example, the slave is called slave of a master and the master is called master of a slave; the double double of a half, and the half half of a double" (*Categories* 6b28-30).[17] But Aristotle by no means takes that sense of dependency to invalidate the master's independence and superiority. Indeed,

the master *wants* a relational status: superiority, the rule over another. The fact that this superiority requires an inferior—specifically, another who bows to him and serves him—does not undermine the master's self-conception but only affirms it. Moreover, that the master's life *without toil* depends upon the work of another is clear to him. Indeed, it is the whole point of the arrangement. These senses of dependency are neither unknown to the master, nor do they impinge upon his own social status and self-conception. Finally, Hegel himself clearly does not think that the bare fact of one's reliance upon others undermines one's freedom, for he ultimately wants to show that true freedom does, in some way, depend upon a certain relation with others.

These remarks, however, are intended only to bring into relief the kind of dependency that is really at issue in the Unconscious Dependence argument. Naturally, when we speak of the contrast between dependence and independence in the sense relevant to one's freedom, we do not mean the bare dependence of relatives as such—in the sense that the mother, qua mother, is dependent upon the newborn, or that the greater, qua greater, is dependent upon the lesser, etc. Rather, the type of dependence at issue denotes, in effect, a lack of control over one's own life, like the child who depends both upon the superior abilities and the goodwill of his parents. Unlike a child, who *can* generally count on the goodwill of his parents, the most complete form of dependence involves reliance on the goodwill of another who does not have one's interests at heart—like a prisoner who, but for his jailor, would die of hunger or thirst behind bars. In this sense, the most plausible version of the Unconscious Dependence argument is the view that, beneath the appearance of dominance, the master's position is characterized by a kind of helplessness and precarity (i.e. a form of powerlessness), for both his status and the provision of his needs depend upon the obedient service of another, who by no means bears him good will.

Without a doubt, the master would be in quite a bind if his lordship depended upon the goodwill of his slave. But, for that very reason, he does not rely upon that goodwill but only upon his own superior strength and his power to coerce the other by posing a standing threat to the other's life. To suppose that the master is helplessly dependent upon the other is, in effect, to suppose that the slave is not performing forced labor but a kind of benevolent charity. Indeed, if the master's only problem were a lack of sufficient power over his situation (and the precarity that comes with it), then the appropriate solution would be the one masters have long adopted to address that concern—namely, to secure his position by the greater consolidation of power over the enslaved. He could fail in this endeavor, just as he could have lost the original struggle, but that is not a problem for the master as such but, rather, for the *would-be* master who fails to secure the dominance necessary to obtain coerced obedience. So long as the master maintains that dominance (through superior power), it is not he who is dependent in the relevant sense. On the contrary, it is the slave who is dependent upon the capricious will of another, for he is the one who stands to be killed the moment the master is unsatisfied. "Death," Hegel writes, is "the absolute master" (PhG 1977, ¶194), and so long as death remains the consequence of insubordination, it is the master who makes the other's life depend upon his will, not the other way around.[18]

In fact, by contrast to the Unconscious Dependence view, I will argue that the master's problem emerges, indirectly, from the way that the slave is dependent upon *him*. The slave is not dependent upon the master in the sense that he is otherwise unable to fend for himself. He is not like the helpless child who has the good fortune of a competent parent who provides for him. Rather, he has the ill fortune that his own life depends upon providing both for himself and his master. He is thus dependent, in the first instance, in the sense that his life is in thrall to another.

But the slave's life and action are also dependent upon the master in a second, directly related sense. Namely, as a direct result of his thralldom, the life and action of the slave are dependent upon the master in the way that the *tool* and its function are dependent upon the craftsman. Hegel's analysis of the master–slave relation centers on this ancient, Aristotelian idea that the slave as such is a "living tool" (*Politics* 1253b29)—more specifically, a conscious one: "Because now there is only one will, the will of the master, it is thus a self-seeking will, directed toward its own desires, and to this extent the slave is an instrument, not an end in itself, though this instrument is likewise a consciousness" (VPG I 2008, 472).

This role as a living, conscious instrument means not only that the slave is used by his master, as a means toward his selfish ends. It also means that, like a plough or a beast of burden, the slave is fundamentally under the *control* of

the master. Not directly, like a plough or an ox (that is the whole point), but indirectly, because unlike the plough, the slave can be moved not only by direct manipulation, but by fear. And unlike the ox, his motivating fear is not confined to present, perceptible dangers, but lives in the ever-present knowledge of the consequences of his disobedience. Accordingly, if the carpenter does not stand in a servile relation of dependency to his tools (which he can control, use, or replace at his absolute discretion), then this is all the more so of the master's relation to the slave (so long as he maintains superiority of power).[19] The master exerts even greater control over the slave than this, because, out of justified mortal fear, the slave conforms through his own action to the master's will. The saw does not care if it breaks, if it is defective, if it is thrown out or destroyed. It is unmoved by its own wants, fears, or desires. Not so for the slave. This is why the slave is, for the master, the *paradigmatic* tool, the most perfect tool. Aristotle expresses the point quite explicitly:

> [T]he slave is himself an instrument which takes precedence over all other instruments. For if every instrument could accomplish its own work, obeying or anticipating the will of others, like the statues of Daedalus, or the tripods of Hephaestus, which, says the poet, "of their own accord entered the assembly of the Gods;" if, in like manner, the shuttle would weave and the plectrum touch the lyre without a hand to guide them, chief workmen would not want servants, nor masters slaves.
>
> (*Politics* 1253b30-35)

The injustice and perversity of the idea is evident to us: the slave is the perfect means precisely because he is an end *for himself*. He continually performs the master's work through his own efforts, precisely because of his self-awareness, his reason, and his desire to live. This is the great, horrific tragedy of the matter. What we now need to examine is how the master's cruel reduction of another to the status of a mere instrument fails to realize his own end. As we've seen, proponents of the Unconscious Dependence argument locate this failure in the very fact that the master's status and livelihood come to rely not upon himself but another—the slave. I've argued that this diagnosis is too easy, for it does not sufficiently recognize the implications of the underlying power structure. The service that the master relies upon is secured by the control he exerts over the other by virtue of the power he possesses over the other's life. When Kaufmann writes that the slave (not the master) is truly self-reliant, he does not believe this claim to be undermined by the slave's effective use of tools. Nor should he, for the slave himself is the one who *makes* the plough and the hammer do their work. But precisely because the slave performs forced labor, it is the master himself who makes the slave serve him. For Hegel (as I will discuss shortly), the use of tools in no way compromises but expands our independence. For that very reason, the master's ability to employ the *consummate* tool allows him to achieve that kind of independence in its fullest form. His problem, I will argue, is that he overestimates that limited form of independence, even by the measure of his own selfish interest.

4 | THE MASTER–SLAVE DIALECTIC AND THE USER-TOOL DIALECTIC

4.1 | Freedom through Desire and Domination

We can only understand Hegel's critique of the master by understanding, first, why the direct subjugation of another might, for the master, be regarded as an end in itself—as the *fulfillment* of a certain conception of a self-sufficient life. But this requires that we have a clear understanding of the unique kind of 'being-for-self' that the master enjoys. As we've seen, the kind of independence the master seeks is really a form of unconstrained individual self-fulfillment. What we need to see is why, for Hegel, the master's interest in *that* kind of independence leads to the assertion of absolute social hierarchy. To see this, we must understand both the similarity and the difference between the master's independence and the kind of independence asserted through the direct satisfaction of one's immediate desires.

As noted in section two, the latter form of independence likewise concerns a kind of unconstrained self-fulfillment. But the direct gratification of one's immediate desires (through personal effort) is not *without* any form of constraint. The natural world does not simply conform to one's wishes. Rather, to directly take what one wants from nature requires that one overcome the resistance posed by the independent existence of natural things (their own '*Selbstständigkeit*'). By successfully exerting one's power over such things, one shows only that their independent existence is no absolute constraint but one that can be overcome through one's own efforts.

But, for Hegel, the internal problem with *this* form of unconstrained self-fulfillment lies simply in its inherent transience and the corresponding need to endlessly repeat the effort. Immediate gratifications are fleeting and give way to new unsatisfied desires. Indeed, so long as I live and breathe, I *must* continue to desire and thus pursue some new desire for some new object.[20] Accordingly, while I can certainly show that some individual object poses no absolute constraint to my satisfaction, I no sooner overcome that resistance than I must pursue some new desire and confront the resistance of yet another thing. So long as my independence rests solely on singular exercises of force in satisfying my immediate desires, I must therefore remain in a kind of Sisyphean existence. For like Sisyphus and his boulder, I may achieve my immediate goal and overcome the resistance of my object, but I must endlessly repeat the process and remain in an interminable struggle against the constraints of the natural world. In sum, the unconstrained self-fulfillment that I achieve in immediate desire-satisfaction is, in both of its respects, as fleeting and insubstantial as the immediate gratification itself.

Here is where "another self-consciousness" enters the picture. Another self-aware subject is capable of doing something mere things cannot: he can conform to my will *through his own action and intention*, and he can do so in an enduring way—without my having to continually struggle against him to fulfill my ends. Ideally, this would occur when our own interests are genuinely aligned, and when I in turn reciprocate that service (as in a true community of free individuals). Alternatively, I can create a kind of ersatz alignment of interests by, as it were, making the other an offer he cannot refuse (serve me or die). This is the kind of arrangement the master achieves. And by forcing another into unresisting obedience, he also frees himself from the need to struggle against the endless resistance of natural things, for someone else now performs that Sisyphean toil on his behalf. Thus, as in immediate desire-satisfaction, the master exists for himself by asserting his power over the resistance of his objects and thereby attaining his own enjoyment. But by contrast to the satisfaction of immediate desires through one's own direct efforts, the master overcomes the constraints of natural things in a more complete and permanent manner. As Hegel writes:

> What desire failed to achieve, he [the master] succeeds in doing, viz. to have done with the thing altogether, and to achieve satisfaction in the enjoyment of it. Desire failed to do this because of the thing's independence [*Selbstständigkeit*]; but the master, who has interposed the slave between it and himself, takes to himself only the dependent [*unselbständig*] aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it. The aspect of its independence, he leaves to the slave, who works on it.
>
> (PhG 1977, ¶190)

In this way, the work of the slave has a double function for the master. The slave permanently preserves the master by realizing the master's purposes *through* nature, while also preserving his master *from* nature and the violent struggle against it that self-preservation otherwise requires. This is the kind of *Selbstständigkeit* the master achieves through absolute social hierarchy.

4.2 | Independence Through a Tool

But the double function of the slave is, for Hegel, the essential double function of *tools* generally. The slave is thus the consummate tool, the paradigmatic tool. Indeed, Hegel's general account of the user-tool relationship in the *Science of Logic* repeatedly describes that relationship through the language of mastery and service.[21] Here, I will quote

a rather long passage from the *Logic*'s "Teleology" chapter, for Hegel's master–slave dialectic is itself, in an important way, the consummate form of Hegel's dialectic of the purposive subject and the tool:

> That the purpose immediately refers to an object and makes it into a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as *violence* inasmuch as purpose appears of an entirely different nature than the object, and the two objects stand toward one another as self-standing totalities. But that the purpose posits itself in a *mediated* connection with the object, and *between* itself and this object *inserts* another object [the tool], may be regarded as the *cunning* of reason. As remarked, the finitude of rationality has this side, that purpose relates to the object as a presupposition, that is, as external. In an *unmediated connection* with that object, purpose would itself enter into the sphere of mechanism and chemism and would therefore be subject to contingency and to the loss of its determining vocation to be the concept that exists in and for itself. But in this way, by sending an object as a means ahead of it, it lets the object slave away externally[22] in its stead, abandons it to wear and tear while preserving itself behind it against mechanical violence.
>
> (SL 2010, 663/GW 1968 12, 166)

The master, of course, is the consummate embodiment of this cunning; the slave, by contrast, is the consummate tool which the master sends ahead to bear the brunt of external nature in his stead. As we have seen, for Hegel, the servitude of another thus provides the master with a more complete and enduring form of independence toward external nature than immediate desire-satisfaction. And for precisely the same reasons, Hegel claims that the *tool* is a more complete outer embodiment of the subject's agency than the immediate satisfactions produced by it:

> To this extent the means is higher than the finite purposes of external purposiveness: the plough is more honorable than the immediate enjoyments which it procures and which are the purposes. The tool lasts while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. It is in their tools that human beings possess power over external nature, even though with respect to their purposes they are subjected to it.
>
> (SL 2010, 663/GW 1968 12, 166)

Again, it goes without saying that a human being's forcible reduction to the function of a tool is hideous and deplorable. Our interest in this function pertains to its reverse side: how this unhappy condition redounds to the master himself.

5 | THE END AND THE MEANS

5.1 | Bondage as the 'Truth' of the Master

To see how this role of the slave as a tool (a mere means) infects the *master*'s freedom, let's begin by introducing Hegel's all-too-brief explanation of the speciousness of the master's freedom. He writes:

> In this recognition, the unessential consciousness [the slave] is for the master the object, which constitutes the *truth* of his certainty of himself. But it is clear that this object does not correspond to its concept, but rather that the object in which the master has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-self* as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness and its unessential action.
>
> (PhG 1977, ¶192)

The meaning of Hegel's brief critique of the master is, in one respect, quite transparent, so long as we simply transpose the master–slave relation into Hegel's abstract formulas of freedom and self-consciousness—the reflection of oneself in another, the recognition of oneself in one's object, etc. In this abstract sense, it is obvious that the master's 'object' (the slave) is, for him, the very opposite of himself. More precisely, Hegel seems to be saying that, in some sense, what the master sees in the slave *is* himself, the 'truth' of himself. But what does this claim really amount to?

As we've seen in section three, one way of understanding the sense in which the master's 'self-certainty' is (falsely) confirmed by the slave's recognition is to claim that the master holds certain beliefs about himself that depend upon the other's affirmation of their truth. I have argued that this is the wrong way of framing the whole issue. Instead, Hegel's way of framing the issue turns upon a *teleological* notion of seeing myself reflected in my object—namely, the other's conformity to myself and my internal ends, insofar as this is achieved through my own agency.

This framing provides a much more determinate way of approaching Hegel's claim that the truth of the master is the 'unessential action' of the slave. For this means, in the first instance, that the servile labor performed by the slave is the achieved product of the master's power over him. Thus, Hegel writes, "what the slave does is really the action of the master" (PhG 1977, ¶191). The reason for this lies in the fact that this relationship has the form of a certain user-tool relationship. The action of the tool is really the action of its user, for the tool works only through the control its user exerts over it. The user performs an action *by means* of the tool. Similarly, the slave performs his service only because of the dominant power and control which the master exerts over him—it is the master who makes him do it. That is the sense in which the slave's work is an 'unessential action.' The point is not that this work is unnecessary, but that it is *action* only in a derivative sense. The master thus serves his own purposes, he "exist[s] only for himself" (PhG 1977, ¶191), because of the coercive control he exerts over the slave—a control which, again, is remote, since the slave, unlike the plough, can be moved by *fear*.

Accordingly, Hegel's critique of the master is some version of this claim: *because* the action of the slave is really the master's own action, the 'truth' of the life of the master is really the unfree life of the other. But in what sense? What aspect of the latter's servility infects the master's own freedom? Here, as throughout this inquiry, we must be patient not to rush to a desired conclusion (the false freedom of the master) through an insufficient argument.

Insofar as the slave's action is really the *master*'s, that action is nonetheless mediated by the subordinate work of the slave. The obviously servile *part* of the action (i.e. the work of the other qua tool) is the very thing against which the master preserves himself. Accordingly, if the "unessential consciousness and its unessential action" are to be regarded as the 'truth' of the master's own life and action, then we must see how that servility is not merely contained within one part of the action (the lot of the slave) but infects the whole action and the master's own part in it, for it is only in that sense that this action is the master's own. In other words, we must focus our attention on (a) what the master does *to* the slave, and (b) what he thereby does *through* the slave, for these are the only aspects of the relation that are ultimately attributable to the master himself.

Now what the master achieves *through* the slave is the 'pure enjoyment' of the fruits procured by the other's labor. What he does *to* the slave is simple: he holds him in subjugation. That is, he effectively instrumentalizes him, puts him to work, and he does this by maintaining him in a constant state of justified mortal fear. In the former respect, the slave functions only as a means to some other end (the master's various enjoyments). In the latter respect, the slave's life of servitude is the intended *effect* of the master's dominant power. It is, I suggest, in this latter respect that the slave's life ultimately comes to corrupt the master's own freedom.

5.2 | Master and Midas

To see why, we should first note that in this latter respect, a slave as such is the master's own product—the living product of his ongoing domination. Like one who cuts down a tree and transforms its material into a table that he keeps in his employ, the master has broken the independent existence of the other, his independent will. By holding the other's life in his hands, he has shaped and continually shapes the other into something that purely serves his

own ends. He has forged a human being into a living tool and continues to preserve him in that state. Insofar as the servile life of the slave is both the initial and ongoing *product* of the master's action, the slave's servile life is, in this respect, an *end* that the master has realized and continues to realize—if only (importantly) a relative end.

The master's problem, I am claiming, lies in the fact that this product (his personal human tool) is really the master's highest end and his primary achievement. But why should we think this, and how would this undermine the freedom the master seeks—his unconstrained self-fulfillment? Let us examine the matter more closely.

First, it is important to reemphasize what kind of subject, with what kind of character, Hegel is considering in his discussion of the master. The master here is understood as the embodiment of a certain purely individualistic conception of freedom—the unrestrained fulfillment of an absolutely self-seeking will. To this extent, he does not acknowledge the independence of *anything* outside himself and can find satisfaction only in reducing other things (and people) to mere means. Put simply, to be absolutely self-seeking is to hold a domineering attitude toward the external world.

To see why a *human tool* should hold a kind of absolute value to him, we can again distinguish this product of his domination from the external ends achieved by means of it. They are, first, his natural self-preservation and, second, the various immediate enjoyments he obtains. But mere survival on its own cannot be his ultimate aim, for in merely surviving, he is no different from his slave, whom he holds in contempt. And insofar as he simply enjoys fleeting, transient pleasures, he is no different from one who leads a life of immediate desire-satisfaction (through one's own efforts, not another's). These pleasures come and go. Now he feels like some wine, now some grapes, some cheese, etc., and of course he gets his wishes, but these things are what they appear to be, nothing more. The slave has allowed him to overcome the external side of the problem of immediate desire—namely, the endless outer struggle to obtain his gratification. But transient enjoyments provide no greater satisfaction on that account. He remains, in this respect, like the 'leaky jar' of Plato's *Gorgias*,[23] even though someone else is now tasked with endlessly replenishing him.

By contrast to these insubstantial objects and the fleeting pleasures they afford, what is essential to the master is (a) that these delights *always* be at his ready disposal and, most importantly, (b) that he *never* have to work for them. In other words, what really matters to him is to live the life of the master—i.e. to have a slave: "the means is higher than the finite purposes of external purposiveness [...] The tool lasts while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten" (SL 2010, 663/GW 1968 12, 166). Force another man to fish, and you eat freely for a lifetime. Above all, what matters is that his possession of this tool (and the idleness thus enjoyed) is the reflection, the realization of the power of his self-seeking will. In this respect, he is not unlike the miser, who ultimately cares little for the consumable goods he procures, but cherishes only the fact that, through his own power, he is a man of substantial *means*. Such means thus have the value of a primary end.

The slave's life of servitude—his complete instrumentalization—is itself the highest achievement of the master, the most complete fulfillment of his interest in existing for himself. The truly enduring product and reflection of his will and power—the only thing more substantial than the little pleasures that come and go—is his living tool. But this means that, like the miser, the highest and only substantial end which he achieves is something that is a mere means, not an end in itself. Indeed, in this sense he is different from the miser, who, like Silas Marner in his lonely cabin, at least cherishes his gold and looks upon it lovingly.[24] Rather, the master's true fortune, the substantial means he has acquired and preserves, is something he holds in utter contempt, something he does not even care to look at, something not to be seen or heard—"the unessential consciousness and its unessential action."

The master, of course, finds no satisfaction in the slave himself—as, by contrast, one finds lasting satisfaction in a friend. Naturally, his domineering will does not allow him to have a true friend at all, for that would require acknowledging another as an independent end, not a mere means. But the only other source of his satisfaction is mere things and the inherently fleeting pleasures they afford—the wine and the cheese, etc. One does not need to be a moralist to recognize that such things provide no lasting fulfillment—that the monotonous repetition of such superficial enjoyments renders them only more tiresome.

The freedom the master desires is completely unseparated from his own self-interest, for it consists simply in the power to attain his own personal fulfillment. But that is a power which he *lacks*, and what constrains him is not an external but an internal obstacle. Hegel's claim is that the desire to assert direct domination over another springs from the inherently domineering attitude of a purely self-seeking will. Such an attitude can only be satisfied in the subjection of everything else to one's will, and the domination of another human being satisfies the demands of that attitude in the most complete way possible. Thus, the master gets what he seeks—*a slave*. But the only thing that can satisfy him affords no true satisfaction at all, for his most prized possession, the supreme object of his domineering desire is, at the same time, something he despises—something he regards as a contemptible means. He is, in this way, like the wretched King Midas. The fulfillment of his innermost wish turns out to be nothing more than a lowly and unfulfilling means.

5.3 | The Master's Inner and Outer Limitations

In one respect, then, Hegel's critique of the master is a variation on a more traditional thought: as the slave is outwardly bound, so is the master constrained by his own inner defects. This is why Hegel's account of mastery and servitude is followed by a discussion of a familiar expression of that kind of view—Stoicism. But Hegel thinks the Stoic's diagnosis of the problem (and its corresponding solution) is ultimately shallow and unsatisfying, and the foregoing analysis of his critique allows us to see what is unique in Hegel's analysis and why any mere appeal to reason and self-restraint misses the point of the master's problem.

First, the master's problem is not simply one of being 'enslaved' by his own sensuous desires—pushed and pulled in an endless effort to gratify them. Qua master, he has overcome that problem—not because he has tamed his desires, but because he has forced another into the endless toil of obeying them. He is, in that respect, a kind of unmoved mover, idly setting another to work in the service of his own enjoyment. Nor does Hegel simply view natural desire as a kind of a quasi-external force that must be subdued. Rather, for Hegel, the master's problem derives from a different, more specific source: his attempt to fulfill a purely self-seeking will. Such a will can only be satisfied by subjecting its objects to itself—either in acts of consumption and destruction or in the possession of mere means. All it can attain, in other words, are impermanent ends, which afford fleeting gratification, and enduring means, which afford no satisfaction in themselves. One response to that problem would be to withdraw one's interest from outer objects and achievements altogether. But, for Hegel, the master's problem lies precisely in his inability to find his satisfaction *in another*. Specifically, he lacks the ability to find his fulfillment in a truly self-standing 'other,' considered as an independent end in itself.

I will return to this last point shortly. But to appreciate the novel result of Hegel's critique of the master, we should review the problem to which mastery itself was a proximate but defective solution. As discussed in section four, what drives the progression of the *Phenomenology*'s "Self-Consciousness" chapter is an inner tension concerning the independence of a self-aware subject and its relation to its external objects. Put simply, the subject's independent will can only be *realized* in and through the world which confronts it. But the world does not immediately conform to the subject and its purposes. To that extent, the natural objects through which one's will may be fulfilled stand initially as a constraint and limitation that must be overcome in order to realize one's aims. In immediate desire-satisfaction, this is achieved by depriving the object of its independent existence altogether and making it conform absolutely to oneself. But in that satisfaction, the purposive subject persists and must therefore repeat the process all over again. The result is a permanently antagonistic relation to the world, defined by endless struggle and want.

The master overcomes this endless antagonism toward nature. By means of his slave, he achieves a little world of his own—a private dominion which gratifies his will without struggle or resistance (so long as he maintains his status). Within his domain, he remains 'with himself in his objects': his little world does not confront him as a permanently recalcitrant 'other' but as an enduring, outer habitation that conforms to his desires. This, of course, is only

made possible because the true terrain in which his will assumes residence is "another self-consciousness"—the slave himself. For these reasons, however, the master's conviction that being a master *is* the worldly realization of his independent will may be false, but it is by no means obviously false.

In fact, Hegel devotes serious consideration to this form of independence precisely because it contains the basic elements of what he takes to be the *true* form that it defectively instantiates: namely, to live and move not merely in a natural world (a state of nature) but a world that is itself the product of spirit (a society)—a world whose substance is the enduring home that the individual's will enjoys in the common will and action of others. Thus Hegel writes: "The struggle for recognition and the submission under a master is the appearance [*Erscheinung*] in which the shared life of humankind [*das Zusammenleben des Menschen*], as a beginning of states, has emerged. [...] Violence is the external or phenomenal [*erscheinende*] beginning of states, not their substantial principle" (EPS ¶433). It is the 'appearance' of this *Zusammenleben des Menschen* in the double sense of a manifestation and a mere semblance of the true article, for here the common life and will is only the will of one—a 'We' that is merely 'I.' It is precisely for this reason that the outer realization of the master's will is, in truth, no such thing but merely an unsatisfying means.

That is why Hegel's claim is not *merely* that the subjugation of another is at odds with the master's freedom. His claim, rather, is that his true defect lies in the *failure* to reciprocally recognize the other. His problem, that is, would not be overcome merely by retreating from the society of others. To conclude this paper, I will offer a brief sketch of why the master's problem lies not simply in seeking another subject as an absolute means to his own fulfillment, but rather, in his failure to reciprocally treat the other as an independent end in himself.

6 | CONCLUSION: OVERCOMING THE MASTER'S PROBLEM

As I noted in section four, Hegel's original introduction of the need for "another self-consciousness" derived from the idea that—by contrast to mere physical things—another self-conscious subject is uniquely capable of serving my ends in an enduring way and through its own action. Hegel expresses this claim in terms of *satisfaction*: "Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness" (PhG 1977, ¶175). But, as I also noted in that context, another's unresisting fulfillment of my own purposes in no way depends (in principle) upon another's mere subservience to me. It occurs also when another genuinely regards me as an *end* and freely treats me as such.

This also means that the enjoyment of a form of unconstrained self-fulfillment is in no way restricted to the domination of another (which, indeed, does not even attain it). The reason the master accords such high value to the slave is precisely because of that unresisting conformity to his ends. His problem is not that he values the unconstrained fulfillment afforded by another self-conscious subject, nor is his problem that he thus values this other as a kind of ultimate end. The problem is that he values another human being *qua mere means* as an ultimate end. That is why, although he is not constrained by the other, he finds no true fulfillment in the other who serves him.

In order to achieve satisfaction in another's treating me as an *end*, I should have to reciprocally regard the *other* as a genuine end. This is the true enjoyment of unconstrained self-fulfillment in and through another: the freely reciprocated service of different individuals who value one another as ends in themselves. It is experienced in love and friendship, and in any community united by mutual recognition and genuine common will. Of course, this kind of non-constraint does not mean mere unbridled egotism—like the self-seeking will of the master. Rather, in recognizing the will of another, I must restrain my one-sided self-interest (like, in a way, the slave must also do). But insofar as I see my own will genuinely reflected in another's (who recognizes my will in turn), the other's will is no true constraint to my own, nor is my acknowledgment of it a form of servitude. Hegel describes such a relation as *Geist*, spirit: "this absolute substance [Substanz], which, in the complete freedom and self-sufficiency of its opposites, namely, different self-consciousnesses existing for themselves, is their unity: I that is We, and We that is I" (PhG 1977, ¶178).

These concluding remarks are only the briefest sketch of the kind of freedom that, for Hegel, can only be achieved through the relation with another founded upon genuine mutual recognition and reciprocity. Indeed, in the fourth chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel himself only gives a very brief and abstract outline of this true concept

of the freedom gained through mutual recognition. But, as I've argued in this paper, we best understand this freedom by seeing how it is, in an important sense, the very freedom the master aims to achieve through domination but cannot achieve by that means.

The master, as we've seen, is interested in freedom in a very basic sense: unconstrained self-interest. Indeed, if we viewed the master's own problem only as a failure to act in accordance with a higher form of reason—whether as mere self-discipline or the subordination of his self-interest to a universal law—then we should really have no critique of a purely egoistic conception of personal freedom, like the kind sought by Plato's figures of Callicles or Thrasymachus. Moreover, if we claimed that the master lacked independence merely because his freedom and self-fulfillment relied upon the efforts of another, then we should not understand why, for Hegel, true freedom and self-fulfillment *do* depend on our relations with others.

Hegel's critique, I have argued, is far more interesting: by merely instrumentalizing others, one in fact deprives oneself of the only adequate means for truly enjoying one's own unconstrained satisfaction. Thus, one's very freedom *as an individual* achieves its fullest form in a genuine community with others—in the reciprocal promotion and enjoyment of one another's freedom. To close with a quotation from Hegel's *Differenzschrift*: "The community of a person with others must not be regarded as a limitation of the true freedom of the individual but essentially as its enlargement. Highest community is highest freedom, both in terms of power and of its exercise" (DF 1977, 145).[25]

ORCID

Stephen Cunniff https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0290-8112

ENDNOTES

[1] Some interpreters have argued that we should not read Hegel's account as a treatment of literal slavery but, rather, as a metaphor—either for a relation between different aspects of the individual subject (McDowell 2009; Stekeler-Weithofer 2008), or for non-reciprocal social relations more generally (Brandom 2019; Ikäheimo 2022). I agree that Hegel's treatment of mastery and servitude is also meant to have broader philosophical implications, but I think the metaphorical reading is misguided and obscures Hegel's argument (for instance, by wrongly assimilating slavery to the model of fundamentally different forms of non-reciprocity). Perhaps the most direct evidence against the metaphorical reading is that, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel concludes his lengthiest discussion of literal slavery by referring the reader to this part of the *Phenomenology* (and its corresponding section in the *Philosophy of Spirit*) for further discussion of the matter (PR 1986, §57R).

[2] Cf. Sartre 1956, 318–329.

[3] For examples of this view, cf. Pinkard 1996, 60; Pippin 2010, 84; Brandom 2019, 340; Taylor 1975, 153–7; Williams 1997, 59–64.

[4] Note, throughout this essay, I will translate Hegel's 'Knecht' as 'slave.' Miller translates the term as 'bondsman,' (in keeping with his translation of *Knechtschaft* as 'bondage.') But bondsman is a virtually meaningless term in English. Pinkard renders it as 'servant,' which is, in a way, a more faithful translation (the normal German term for 'slave' is *Sklav*). But while 'servitude' (like *Knechtschaft*) has clear connotations of bondage, the term 'servant' does not clearly imply that. Regardless of the term, the *Knecht* in Hegel's story is one who is forced to labor for the *Herr* on pain of death. That is slavery. Finally, I will forego the term 'enslaved person,' which is used to emphasize that slavery is a role that a person has been forced into, not the person herself. But Hegel is precisely talking about the role as such, not the complex individuality of the one who is forced into the role.

[5] For examples of this view, cf. Shklar 1976, 61; Kaufmann 1978, 137; Hyppolite 1974, 173; Siep 2014, 93; Pippin 1989, 162.

[6] Specifically, the destruction of a "living thing" [*ein Lebendiges*] (PhG 1977, ¶¶168, 174).

[7] This sense of the term 'self-consciousness' marks a contrast to the preceding three chapters (collectively titled "Consciousness"), each of which has as its theme a certain conception of a truly 'self-standing' external object as such: first as the 'this' (Chapter I), next as the 'thing-with-properties' (Chapter II), then as an inner 'force,' and again as an unchanging realm of natural laws, etc. (Chapter III). The theme of chapter IV is the idea of the subject itself as what is truly 'self-standing.' Cf. Brownlee (2023, 45–6) for a related discussion of this point. Beyond the schematics of Hegel's text, the account of chapter IV has as its proximate background Fichte's conception of self-consciousness as the subject's continual activity of 'positing' its own freedom through its transcendence of natural limitations. Redding (2023) gives an

insightful account of the pervasive Fichte-reference in *Phenomenology* IV (though I disagree with his view that Hegel's account is merely parroting Fichte for the sake of critiquing him).

[8] Translations from the German editions of Hegel's works are my own. Where published English translations are cited, I have frequently modified them for clarity and precision.

[9] Cf. EL 1986, §24Z, PR 1986, §22.

[10] The subsection of the chapter in which Hegel's treatment of mastery and servitude appears is titled: *"Selbstständigkeit und Unselbstständigkeit des Selbstbewußtseins; Herrschaft und Knechtschaft"*

[11] "das Andere [....] vom Ersten als dem Unterworfenen anerkannt wird."

[12] Cf. Pinkard 1996, 60 for a similar argument.

[13] Cf. Neuhouser 2009, 49; Pinkard 2018, xxiii.

[14] Cf. Pippin 2010, 73; Brandom 2019, 340. For these readers, the kind of authority the master claims is a *normative* authority and denotes the objective, collectively-binding validity of his own view of things. An interest in another's recognition of this kind of authority consists, as Robert Pippin puts it, in an individual subject's "desire to confirm that what it takes to be true or right or good is [true or right or good]" (Pippin 2010, 60). This way of framing the independence the master seeks through recognition is based upon a common view that Hegel's theory of recognition is, in essence, an attempt to give a social-historical twist to a Kantian understanding of human freedom—namely, that to act freely is to act on the basis of universally binding principles, rather than mere natural desires and individual self-interest (Cf. Kant 1902, *Groundwork* 4:422). This reading of Hegel's theory of recognition is expressed most explicitly in Pippin (2000).

[15] Neuhouser describes the sought-after recognition as that of its recipient's "unconditional authority for the desiring and believing of any subject" (2009, 49)—apparently implying that one who confers such recognition should not only do as the other commands but also acknowledge the rightness of his desires and beliefs. Pinkard likewise implies that the master is interested in the inner grounds of the slave's obedience in his argument that the master's desire for recognition is frustrated by the fact the slave obeys only out of fear: "To the extent that the master comes to realize this, he realizes that on his own terms he has failed. He has not established his own subjective point of view as the truth; he has merely managed for contingent reasons to have the slave accept it as the truth, with there being no further ground for the acceptance than the contingent fact that out of fear for his life, the slave opted to submit to the master" (Pinkard 1996, 60).

[16] Cf. also Siep 2014, 93; Pippin 1989, 162.

[17] English translations of Aristotle are from Aristotle 1984.

[18] For an excellent treatment of the classical notion of slavery as dependence on the goodwill of another, cf. Skinner (1998).

[19] Siep (2014, 93) also emphasizes the important connection of Hegel's 'slave' to Aristotle's notion of the 'living tool' and to Hegel's own concept of the tool as such. But Siep uses that connection to argue that the master is dependent upon the slave. I think that is a mistake and that the opposite is the case (both in itself and for Hegel). The tool and its function are dependent on and derivative of the user and his agency. Indeed, as a broader conceptual point, Aristotle correctly uses this tool-user example to illustrate the notion of a *pros hen* unity (or 'focal meaning') of different senses of a term. Namely, he notes that the sense in which the medical instrument is 'medical' is derivative of the sense in which the doctor himself is medical, for it is his practicing the art of medicine that gives the instrument that function and character (*Eudemian Ethics* 1236a16-25).

[20] "Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its satisfaction are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from overcoming this other: in order that this overcoming can take place, *there must be this other*" (PhG 1977, ¶175; my emphasis).

[21] Hegel characterizes the user-tool relationship in terms of an *end-means* relationship. In speaking of the tool, he writes "with respect to purpose the object has the character of being powerless and of serving it [*dienen*]" (SL 2010, 661/ GW 1968 12, 164), and he thus speaks of the tool as standing "under the dominance [*Herrschaft*] of the purpose" (SL 2010, 662/ GW 1968 12, 165).

[22] The term here is '*sich äußerlich abarbeiten*' which di Giovanni translates as 'do the slavish work of externality.'

[23] cf. Plato 1997, *Gorgias* 493b.

[24] *Silas Marner*, Eliot (1921).

[25] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the History of Philosophy Roundtable at Loyola University Chicago. I am grateful to the participants and to the host, Joshua Mendelsohn, for their comments. Portions of this paper draw on

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