

The Master / Slave Dialectic

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Reasoning by Analogy about Others

How do you know what's going on inside somebody else's head? You aren't aware of their thoughts in the same way as you're aware of your own. It's a mystery; your clues are their bodily behaviors and your own understanding of how your mind relates to your body. So, you reason by analogy: other minds are to their bodies as my mind is to my body.

From subjective observation I know that A [thirst], which is a thought or feeling, causes B [drinking], which is a bodily act . . . I know also that, whenever B is an act of my own body, A is its cause. I now observe an act of the kind B in a body not my own, and I am having no thought or feeling of the kind A. But I still believe, on the basis of self-observation, that only A can cause B; I therefore infer that there was an A which caused B, though it was not an A that I could observe. On this ground I infer that other people's bodies are associated with minds, which resemble mind in proportion as their bodily behavior resembles my own. [1]

Thinking about Others in terms of our Selves

We think about others in terms of our selves. Each person has a model of himself or herself (self-consciousness) that he or she uses to interpret the behavior of others.

1. THESIS: Consciousness of self as self: Thinking of your self in terms of your self. *If I'm thirsty, then I drink something.*

2. ANTITHESIS: Consciousness of other as other; consciousness of not-self as not-self: Thinking of the other in terms of the other. *You're drinking something.*

3. SYNTHESIS: Consciousness of other as self; consciousness of not-self as self: Thinking of the other in terms of the self. *Therefore, you're thirsty.*

Put two people together and each thinks of the other in terms of self; but now there are two selves hence two others. Everything is doubled, like two mirrors face-to-face.

He thinks about her in terms of himself:

1. If my head itches, then I scratch it.
2. She's scratching her head.
3. Her head itches.

She thinks about him in terms of herself:

1. If I'm tired, then I yawn.
2. He's yawning.
3. He's tired.

Thousands of years of marriage have demonstrated that this sort of dialectic is far from absolute knowledge. Believe me. Try to *learn* something here. You'll probably be tested later.

Confrontation; Domination; Submission; Cooperation

Hegel is about to discuss his famous master / slave dialectic. It's what happens when two self-consciousnesses confront one another: each thinks about the other in terms of the self.

The two self-consciousnesses are like mirrors of one another. Each mirror reflects the other; but it also reflects the other reflecting itself; it reflects the other reflecting itself reflecting the other. This goes on and on and it produces both frenzy and paralysis. The only way to break the mirroring is to fight: the winner is the master, the loser is the slave. But this is an incomplete solution. In the end, the two self-consciousnesses need to learn how to cooperate.

It's important to see that Hegel thinks the master / slave relation is primitive: it's a defective form of self-consciousness whose logic is self-defeating, so that it renders itself logically obsolete and is superseded by the superior form of self-consciousness that is economic cooperation.

Thesis: The Symmetry of Equality

178. If nobody ever acknowledged your existence, you wouldn't exist as a person. You'd just be a personless body. Hegel puts it like this: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when . . . it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged." Suppose nobody else ever talked to you or interacted with you. In some cultures (like the Pennsylvania Deutsch), one way of punishing people is to "shun" them: refuse to speak to them, refuse to eat with them, never touch anything they've touched, never hand them anything. Shunning is far crueler and more effective as a threat than jail or even a beating.

179. Put two self-consciousnesses face-to-face and it's like putting two mirrors face-to-face: each reflects itself in the other, each sees itself in the other. It's like this: I know; you know; I know that you know; you know that I know; I know that you know that I know; you know that I know that you know -- this goes on and on, and nobody can stand it.

180-181. At first the encounter between the two self-consciousness is perfectly symmetrical: the self-consciousnesses are so far exactly identical, so they can't distinguish themselves from one another. Am I you? Are you me? So far, there's nothing to differentiate us. We're totally alike. So we're not different persons; the symmetry destroys our personal identities. This is torture: each wants to be its own person, and so wants to end the symmetry by establishing an asymmetric relation. Each wants to dominate the other ("supersede this otherness of itself"). The tension builds.

182-183. Domination and submission are based on useful action involving objects of natural biological desire. How would I know if I were the dominant person? Because while I would do things FOR MY SELF, you would also do everything FOR MY SELF and not for your self. I would live strictly FOR MY SELF; you would live FOR ANOTHER. You would not live for yourself at all. Since you will do everything for my self and nothing for your self, you will effectively cease to live. You will have no life of your own; you'll be dead.

184. The dialectic of Force and the Understanding is repeated here at a higher level. Now, forces are not merely physical like in electricity, but they are conscious forces that are able to recognize each other: "They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another."

185-186. Tension builds. The symmetry of mutual recognition is unstable. The symmetry must be broken so that of the two opposed self-consciousnesses, one is going to be only recognized (master), the other only recognizing (slave).

Antithesis: The Asymmetry of Master and Slave

187. The only way to settle the matter is in a fight to the death, in which one self-consciousness wins (lives) and the other loses (dies). the relation of the two self-conscious individuals is such that they have to settle their equal opposition by means of a life-and-death struggle -- a dialectical death-match! Freedom can only be won by risking one's whole life, by holding nothing back.

188. The problem is that if one self-consciousness kills the other, the dead self-consciousness can't do anything at all, so it can't do anything for the other. In order to be FOR ANOTHER, self-consciousness has to be somewhat FOR ITSELF. If the one kills the other, it thereby destroys its own freedom, since there's nobody there to recognize it's triumphant victory. You can't rule corpses: a dead servant does not obey anybody and so is free. Simply killing the other in the life-or-death combat is an "abstract negation"; it is "not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession." It's like playing a game of chicken: both contestants know that one of them has to surrender or they'll both die. The pressure on each to surrender increases.

189. Each self-consciousness realizes that it needs both its own life and the life of the other. Their relation in the life-or-death contest is unstable, but at some point one side gives in and surrenders. At this point, the victor has the right to kill the one who surrendered; but of course, the victor realizes that killing the loser would be futile. What the victor wants is recognition, acknowledgement of the victory. You can't be admired by a corpse, so the victor spares the loser's life. The victor does not kill, but rather enslaves the loser. One of the two self-consciousnesses "is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman."

190. The slave WORKS for the master. Before, the master couldn't have his or her desires satisfied just by wishing (i.e. by speaking); but now all he or she has to do is to give a command to the slave, and the desire is satisfied. Mere desire doesn't satisfy itself, because the object of desire is stubborn (food doesn't cook itself: "Desire failed to do this [to satisfy itself without effort] because of the thing's independence; but the lord, who has interposed the bondsman between [the object of desire] and himself, takes to himself only the dependent aspect of the thing and has the pure enjoyment of it. The aspect of its dependence he leaves to the bondsman, who works on it." So, the master says: "Feed me!" and the slave cooks dinner, so that all the master has to do is effortlessly eat and enjoy.

191. The symmetric opposition of self-consciousness is now broken; it is asymmetric: "The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal." The slave is like a mirror that reflects the master; but the master is like a mirror that reflects only his or her own image.

Synthesis: The Symmetry of Cooperation

192. It might seem like the master's got it made: the slave does all his or her work, and recognizes the master's power. The problem is, this isn't the kind of recognition that the master wanted. The master wanted to be recognized by somebody that he or she respects as an equal, as a peer. Instead, the master gets recognition only from a slave, and the master knows that the slave doesn't really respect him or her, but resents and hates the master.

193. Indeed, the tables are going to turn on the master. For the master more and more depends on the slave. The master forgets how to hunt, how to cook. The master gets fat and lazy. Meanwhile, the slave grows stronger and more skilled. The slave is gradually being "transformed into a truly independent consciousness."

194. The life-or-death struggle is what distinguished one self-consciousness as master and the other as slave. It was fear of death that decided the contest. It might seem like the master was able to bear this fear more than the slave, since the slave surrendered in the

face of death. But in fact, the master never really confronted death: only the slave confronted death. The master got off without looking death in the face, since the slave did it first. The slave "has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. . . . [this] absolute melting away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being-for-self, which consequently is implicit in [the consciousness of the slave]. Through his service he rids himself of his attachment to natural existence in every single detail; and gets rid of it by working on it." The real power of self-consciousness, the "absolute negativity" that is able to transform things, belongs more and more to the slave.

195. Work involves discipline and skill. As the slave becomes more disciplined and skilled, his or her power balances that of the master. Immediately after the life-or-death struggle, the master controls the slave and the master is independent; the slave is controlled by the master and the slave is dependent. But now things are equalized: the master controls the slave, but the master is dependent; the slave is controlled by the master, but the slave is independent. The dialectic has balanced the relations between master and slave. Ironically, this is what the master wanted in the first place: the master didn't really want a slave, but respect from a peer.

196. The slave turns into an independent craftsperson and so gains a mind and will of his or her own. But the craftsperson's skill is limited (e.g. to being a cook, a hunter, a shoemaker, a farmer). So "having a 'mind of one's own' is self-will, a freedom which is still enmeshed in servitude. . . it is a skill which is a master over some things, but not over the universal power and the whole of objective being." The result of the slave's turning into a craftsperson is that the master also turns into one: the master and slave both realize that they each benefit more from mutual exchange of services rather than from domination. Political domination turns into economic cooperation.

References.

1. Bertrand Russell, "Analogy" (1948). In T. O. Buford (Ed.), *Essays on Other Minds*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 7.

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