

*Faceless Masters, Faceless Slaves: Hegel's Recognition Theory as it Relates to Proximity*

G.W.F. Hegel's recognition theory demonstrated through the master-slave dialectic has been a source of inspiration and controversy among many 20th and 21st century thinkers. In Hegel's magnum opus, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the master-slave dialectic captures merely one step on a natural consciousness' journey toward the Absolute, but this dialectic has been popularized and deployed numerous times to explore power relations and systems of oppression. As the contemporary world becomes increasingly interconnected, relationships of recognition (and misrecognition) risk being concealed from the public and the very people involved in said recognition actions. A concrete example of this emerges when thinking about unethical activities throughout supply chains. Hegel's master-slave dialectic describes an encounter and subsequent relationship between an individual who oppresses and an individual who is oppressed, but questions arise when one attempts to incorporate this model into systems where multiple oppressors and oppressed exist within a larger system. This particular paper serves to provide a brief exegesis of Hegel's master slave dialectic. After this, a challenge will be presented regarding how Hegel's theory can account for proximal and distal cases of oppression. Lastly, an attempt will be made to address this objection on Hegel's behalf and provide a more expansive model for recognition theory.

As mentioned earlier, Hegel's *Phenomenology* demonstrates an attempt to chart the path of a natural consciousness from a given point to knowledge of the Absolute. One particular method which is deployed throughout the book is a dialectic, which in this case, chronicles an intellectual and existential journey based on cumulative movements, affirmations, and negations. Prior to the introduction of the master-slave dialectic, Hegel discusses the attempts of a single

self-consciousness to affirm its own being as a self-conscious subject. However, the self-consciousness' attempts to establish its own legitimacy are unsatisfactory and end with the negation/destruction of objects which fail to provide an appropriate affirmation of the self-consciousness as an *individual* distinct from the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup> In other words, a single self-consciousness attempts to affirm itself and has a desire to be acknowledged by something outside of itself. Mere objects fail to provide this satisfaction, so the self-consciousness seeks acknowledgement and affirmation from another self-conscious entity. This is where the master-slave dialectic truly begins.

In the section of the *Phenomenology* titled *Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage*, Hegel asserts that that recognition as an event or activity is not possible without two there being parties capable of cognition, and just as important, these parties must “*recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.*”<sup>2,3</sup> It is made clear that each party wants to be known as more than an object – each party wants to be known as the *essential* subject for the sake of securing their individuality and not merely being part of the amalgamation that Hegel calls “life.” This desire of the self-consciousness to affirm itself as the essential subject leads to a conflict in which each self-consciousness risks its own life and attempts to destroy the other.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by Arnold V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. §172.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., §182.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., §184.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., §187.

The resulting conflict results with one self-consciousness having overpowered the other, thus establishing itself as the master (or lord in Hegel's terms) while the other becomes the slave (or bondsman).<sup>5</sup> In this new role, the master perceives the slave as a thing used as a mere means to acquire an object of desire, and the object of desire is only made intelligible through the mediation of the slave.<sup>6</sup> It is essential to understand that the result of the life and death struggle which establishes these two roles is a case of *misrecognition* which Hegel describes as "one-sided and unequal."<sup>7</sup> Hegel later argues that the slave is able to gain a new/better understanding of their own mortality, their relation to things around them, and their ability to influence other objects through work.<sup>8</sup> Through these realizations and a newfound conception of the self, the self-consciousness that was known as a slave is able to achieve liberation.<sup>9</sup> With the general shape of the master-slave dialectic presented, a new issue will be introduced.

While the master-slave dialectic highlights human motivations, shortcomings, and dynamics, it is unclear how well this model can be translated to address contemporary structures of misrecognition (given that literal relations of lords and bondsmen seldom exist, if at all). There are still cases in which issues of misrecognition that Hegel addresses are salient, such as relationships between a parent and child or a boss and employee, but far more pernicious cases of oppression exist today (human trafficking, de facto slavery via unethical labor practices, etc.). Additionally, it is difficult to identify the oppressor and oppressed when particular institutions

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<sup>5</sup> Hegel, §189.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., §190.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., §191.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., §195.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., §196.

have complex human networks with expanses of space, time, and other mediating factors between them. To elaborate on this point, unethical supply chains will be used as a concrete model to illustrate what will be called proximal and distal oppression.

Within a supply chain (or system of production and consumption) there are often multiple components: producers, assemblers, distributors, sellers, and consumers. This number can vary drastically depending on whether or not businesses exist which operate as middle men, owners, supervisors, and consultants., but this model demonstrates the kaleidoscopic nature of a system that is ripe with unethical and egregious behavior (see Amazon, Walmart, Nestle, Monsanto, etc.). Individuals throughout the supply chain often face long hours, impoverished work conditions, and deficient wages. Consumers are often ignorant of the plights of production, and those who are cognizant of it often overlook it or defer responsibility. The primary question, then, is this: how can Hegel's model of the master-slave dialectic account for oppression that occurs despite multiple degrees of separation between parties?

On response on behalf of Hegel is that the master-slave dialectic is not applicable in these situations since the self-consciousnesses involved must recognize the other and be aware of their mutual recognition. If this is the case, then no recognition occurs at all; there appears to be only cognition of another individual within the supply chain as an object that is never met in person. This may be the most simple response, but it is unsatisfying given that an explanation of oppression is still intact that the master-slave dialectic cannot speak to at all. This discourse brings to light the epistemic limits and barriers of oppressors and oppressed in a given system and raises another question: what are oppressors and oppressed expected to know about their situations and how can they overcome them?

Fortunately, there is a response on Hegel's behalf that can address these contemporary issues of oppression that is able to effectively deploy the master-slave dialectic as an analytic tool. In a complex system of misrecognition with proximal and distal mistreatment, proper recognition must occur at the most immediate environment one finds themselves in. Respect and recognition for those in one's immediate environment will (hopefully) generate a cascading effect that helps others further away from them receive the recognition they deserve. Recognition then, would be mediated through the oppressive system itself. In cases such as these, proximity may be an indicator epistemic expectations and moral culpability. Individuals such as first world consumers are in positions closer to knowledge of oppressive systems, and as a result, their responsibility regarding these issues would increase. The responsibility to remedy misrecognition would then be distributed across an oppressive system (an unethical supply chain in this case), with those in privileged positions of knowledge being more responsible for taking action. It is important to note that the master-slave dialectic in this case is deployed as a descriptive tool and not a prescriptive one. Despite this, Hegel's recognition theory has inspired new approaches to social philosophy and ethics which are better suited to address contemporary issues.<sup>10,11</sup>

Hegel's master-slave dialectic, though popular in academic (and quasi-academic) circles, is susceptible to misinterpretation that is dubious at its best and dangerous at its worst. Despite this, the dialectic can still serve as an effective tool for analyzing contemporary social and political issues by highlighting and unpacking instances of misrecognition. Globalization and

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<sup>10</sup> Fraser, Nancy, Axel Honneth, Joel David Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke. *Redistribution or Recognition?: A Political-philosophical Exchange*. London: Verso, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Honneth, Axel. *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

technological advances establish new and complex relationships at a rapid pace, making it imperative to deploy a critical eye and self-reflectivity to ensure that one does not find themselves in a situation where they operate as a master or as a slave.

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