

## Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic and The Relationship between God and Believer

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**Abstract:** In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel characterizes self-consciousness as desire and gives an account of master-slave relationship as an example of how consciousness is brought to the level of self-consciousness as a result of the interaction of two consciousnesses. In this paper, I will firstly try to explain master-slave dialectic, and then to analyze whether it can be useful to understand the relations between God and believer / man. Second, if this dialectic turns out to be useless in such an endeavour, I will try to explain why this is so. It should be said that Hegelian master-slave dialectic is very influential for an understanding of the nature of self-consciousness. It is also very helpful in engaging with the difficult questions both of religion and of philosophy: how is one related to many or how does divine interact with the world and human beings? However, Hegel's master-slave dialectic proposes an answer which has certain deficiencies, especially, in explicating the nature of the relation between God and believer. I will demonstrate why this dialectic can mislead us in understanding how God and believer interact.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Master-Slave Dialectic, God, Believer

### Introduction

In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel characterizes self-consciousness with desire and gives an account of master-slave relationship as an example of how consciousness is brought to the level of self-consciousness as a result of the interaction of two consciousnesses. In this paper, I will firstly try to explain master-slave dialectic, and then to analyze whether it can be useful to un-

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derstand the relations between God and believer / man. Second, if this dialectic turns out to be useless in such an endeavour, I will try to explain why this is so.

## **Dialectic**

*Self-consciousness and Desire:* Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, or put it more rightly, the relation between lordship and bondage can be described as a complicated relationship. In this relationship, both parties change their stance according to changes in the other party. Taking mirror as an image to understand this relationship, more correctly dialectic can be very helpful. For example, it is very well known that before the mirror if one wants to move an arm of the reflection of himself / herself, he / she has to move his / her arms. In this case, the verb "to want" gives us a hint to grasp another important and deeper feature of dialectical relationship between lord and bondsman. Desire is the main motivation behind their relationship.

Why is desire so important? In order to answer this question, we have to look at Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness which lordship and bondage can be taken as something like an example for this discussion to be understood in a better way. The answer that Hegel gives to the question at the beginning of this paragraph is that "... self-consciousness is *Desire* in general" (Hegel, 1977: 105). This sentence implies that self-consciousness cannot be taken as something that is limited to contemplation. Thinking of thoughts is not the definition of self-consciousness. That is to say, introspection in Cartesian sense is not enough to be self-conscious. Introspection that means being aware of what one thinks in Hegelian sense, so to speak, can be defined as consciousness. Consciousness is something like that there is something that is other than oneself (Hegel, 1977: 105). One is conscious if he/she is being aware of the existence of tree or something before himself/herself. In the definition of introspection as self-consciousness is the sum of two consciousnesses. One is being aware of other and the other is being aware of being aware of the other. This way of viewing self-consciousness cannot pave the way for grasping the meaning of Hegel's definition of self-consciousness. We have to look from a different angle. This means that we have to move from desire and try to reach self-consciousness.

Desire can roughly be defined as wanting to do something or possess

something material or non-material. In this definition, the first thing which I would like to emphasize is that desire is related to the process. It is not something that is permanent which is unchanging. There should be something that serves as cause in order for desire to emerge and then desire should be satisfied. It is my contention that Hegel defines this aspect of desire by saying that “self-consciousness...is primarily *desire*, will therefore, on the contrary, learn through experience that the object is independent” (Hegel, 1977: 106). The word “experience” implies the meaning that I want to emphasize with the word “process”. Also, the object is the thing that, so to speak, is the cause of desire and also serves as an element for the satisfaction of desire. But why should the object be independent? The independence of the object is needed because without independent things, desire cannot emerge. That is to say, if the object is already contained, there cannot be any way for desire to be. Moreover, the object has a character of negativity (Hegel, 1977: 106). The independence of the object and the character of negativity are interrelated, that is, they are interdependent. We should admit that if there is desire there must be satisfaction. In this sense, it is not very absurd to say that satisfaction is what makes desire what it is. From this perspective, it becomes much easier to understand why Hegel mentions “overcoming”. He says that “...self-consciousness is certain of itself only by superseding this other that present itself to self-consciousness as an independent life...” (Hegel, 1977: 109). Life can also be understood from the same perspective as we understand desire. Life, in this sense, is a process through which desire makes itself visible and reach the level of satisfaction and having a life means being in the process, being a “living thing” (Hegel, 1977: 107). Supersession, desire and life -taken together- implies the same thing. That is to say, each of them can be defined by using two other concepts both together and separately. In order to satisfy a desire, there needs to be supersession and in order for supersession to be “there must be an “other” (Hegel, 1977: 109). This other also needs to be a living thing that is, not fully contained by self-conscious beings. This means that the object can also be self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977: 110).

At this juncture, it becomes obvious that there should be two self-consciousnesses in order to reach the level of being self-conscious (Hegel, 1977: 110). In order to reach the satisfaction of desire, unlike in the Carte-

sian sense, there cannot be one who is alone before the world and try to reach the ground for indubitable knowledge. That is the knowledge which provides self-consciousness in a true sense. The existence of the other is needed to be self-consciousness. "Reciprocity" is the main component of self-consciousness and makes Hegel's way of philosophizing different from, for example, that of Descartes (Gadamer, 1976: 64). In this sense, for satisfaction of desire there should be others with the ability to demand, and to be independent from the first self-consciousness (Gadamer, 1976: 62). In other words, desire is very important because it is what provides supersession as a way of having certainty of itself. It also implies that both parties are living things and metaphorically enable both parties by putting both of them into duel or combat (Gadamer, 1976: 65). After these remarks about the self-consciousness and desire, we may move to the master-slave dialectic to grasp Hegelian dialectic in a better sense.

*Lordship and Bondage:* Lordship and bondage or master-slave dialectic is used as an example in *Phenomenology*. But, it should not be merely understood as an example. Because, desire is something that enables Hegel to define self-consciousness. The relationship between master and slave shows its importance at this point: if desire is needed, then self-consciousness cannot be told by using the example of a particular individual and a thing that has no capacity to demand.

The status of lordship / master and slave / bondsman does not inherently belong to the individuals who are in relationship to one another. This status is the result of what Hegel calls "life-and-death struggle" (Hegel, 1977: 114). Why do two people engage in such a struggle? The first answer to this question is that they find themselves in this struggle in order to reach the level of self-consciousness. The reason for aiming such a thing, I think, is obviously related to the desire. That is to say, desire is again on the scene. Struggle for living means both parties engage in a rivalry in order to continue to desire. For Hegel, the struggle should be such that both parties force each other to the "extremes" to gain "an existence of their own" (Hegel, 1977: 114). In this game of life and death both parties learn the importance and value of life for their existence, and first determinations are made in the game: one party becomes dependent on the other and becomes "for other" and the other who is independent becomes "for itself" (Hegel,

1977: 115). As a result of this first determination one becomes lord / master and the other is slave / bondsman (Hegel, 1977: 115).

At this point, it can be said that master fails to achieve self-consciousness. Because, it is worthwhile to remember the mirror image or metaphor. The only way to have self-consciousness is to view oneself in the other like in front of the mirror. Master, by viewing himself / herself in slave, cannot recognize himself / herself as a master (Findlay, 1976: 98). It is true that he wins the game of life and death and become master but dependency to the slave makes master less advantageous than the slave (Gadamer, 1976: 68). Due to his / her obligations to the master in the service of him / her, the slave experiences the whole relationship in the process much more different than the master. The slave obviously views his / her existence in the existence of the master. The master is a figure who must be served if the slave wants to survive. In this line of thought, by virtue of working which is the result of master's various desires, the slave has an opportunity to see himself / herself in a different perspective. Yet the only relation for the master is provided with the mediation of the slave, that is, he only "enjoys" (Hegel, 1977: 116). Put it more correctly, the relation with the external world and making determinations on nature in the example of producing, the slave can have a chance to get involved in a different dialectical relationship with nature (Gadamer, 1976: 70). However, this dialectical relationship with nature is not the main reason for the slave to achieve a higher status compared to the master who only has enjoyment. Hegel points this issue by saying that "he (the slave) only works on it" (Hegel, 1977: 116). This working on something and the fear of death can be characterized as what puts the slave in a better place in the relationship than that of the master.

As a result, it can be said that the fear of death - "the Absolute Lord" (Hegel, 1977: 117)- plays a role which can be characterized as the slave's first step to reaching self-consciousness. The slave tries to give his / her life meaning by beginning from the status of the master. Because, it is the master who makes the slave view the life from a different perspective than what the slave used to do before his life-and-death-struggle. This relates the slave to the master and also gives the former, I think, a starting point in order to see himself / herself as the master. By seeing himself / herself in the master, the slave sees what the "being-for-itself" is, while the master views the opposite

which is “being-for-other” in his / her viewing (Hegel, 1977: 117). This is the step that the slave and the master take reciprocally and interdependently. However, the slave works for the master and gains access to the nature that the master lacks. This can be regarded as the second step taken by the slave but not by the master. For Hegel, it can be asserted that work makes the slave externalize himself / herself in the object that is the product of his working (Hegel, 1977: 118). The two components of the fear of death and working constitute for the slave a way to make his / her desires satisfied and, as mentioned above, pave the way for self-consciousness which is something definable with desire. Slave's desire in work can be limited (Hegel, 1977: 118) and this limitation gives slave's desire a more certain character compared to master's desire. This relationship is dialectical in Hegelian sense. The opposition between master and slave at the beginning reaches a different level and makes its way to the “resolving or merging contradictions in character”.<sup>2</sup> Dialectic, in this sense, is the name of the changes that take place in both parties or movements of them, and is rooted in the very ground of this master-slave relationship.

### **God, Man and Incarnation:**

Before giving an account of how Hegel characterizes God and believer, and their relation, it can be worthwhile to mention Hegel's religious commitment. Johannes Hegel, who was the first family member, came to Germany in sixteenth century due to bad attitudes toward Protestants in Catholic Austria (Stepelevich, 1992: 673). Young Hegel was raised up in an environment where Protestantism, especially, Lutheran Protestantism was dominant with regard to religion (Stepelevich, 1992: 674). It can be obviously derived from this that Hegel, concerning the issues about religion, especially, Christianity, took his point of departure from Lutheran Protestantism. His characterization of God and how God relates to believer took its share from his ideas, more correctly, from opposition to Catholicism that I will try to mention in the following lines (Stepelevich, 1992: 674 quoted from Weidemann, 1968: 14). After making some remarks about Hegel's

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2. [http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed\\_in\\_frame=0&search=dialectic&searchmode=none](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=dialectic&searchmode=none)

family and their religious commitment, it is time to try to analyze that in conformity with Hegelian system how he read the relation between God and believer from the perspective of master / lordship and slave / bondage dialectic. In this line of thought, firstly, I want to mention what Hegel's says about God. Hegel characterizes God as an absolute idea in its eternal being, and only God is "in and for itself" (Hegel, 1968: 3). This means that there is no movement in the sense that God, as an idea, "exists in the absolutely unmoved calm of the thinking spirit" (Hegel, 1968: 4). This implies that in thinking, God makes itself an object of thought and the first differentiation comes into being. Hegel calls this first differentiation as an "absolute diremption" (Hegel, 1968: 8). Why is this diremption happening? To be able to answer this question, we must talk about the spirit. For Hegel, spirit is "life" and "movement" and is equal to God (Hegel, 1968: 9-10). We should again recall the intimate relation between desire and life in order to understand the reason why diremption occurs. Like desire, in the course of reaching the level of self-consciousness, spirit has a characteristic of "differentiating itself", too. This inner demand of making, so to speak, itself visible constitutes the dialectical way of God's "movement". This is the movement which makes possible the relation between man/believer and God in a dialectical way. The idea of the movement of God dialectically makes Hegel explain incarnation which is, in turn, related to dialectic itself. Hegel's God is the God of Christianity (Redding, 2007: 60) -especially, God of Lutheranism. His opposition to Catholicism shows itself in the very idea of God. Hegel claims that by putting distance between God and believer, Catholicism separated these two in a way that believer does not have a chance to contact with the divine (Stepelevich, 1992: 683). In the Eucharist, Catholics make Jesus as an external object by wine and bread which is very distant and by viewing him as "objective presence" produces a perversion of Jesus caused by the Catholic Church (Stepelevich, 1992: 685). Divine is enabled to be conceived as a sensible thing which is deprived of all sacred characteristics. Through this practice, they become ignorant about the "internal and subjective realm" (Stepelevich, 1992: 685). Hegel related the perversion to the fall of the Roman Emperor. This emperor was above all Roman citizens because of his "external divinity" and objective presence as an agent guaranteeing the law that he implemented and forcing his

subjects to obey these laws, and being a model for God that the Catholic Church envisioned (Stepelevich, 1992: 686). In this regard, Hegel sees Catholicism as a deficient understanding about Christianity. In contrast to this way of evaluating Catholicism, he views Lutheranism as “the logical and historical term of Christianity” (Stepelevich, 1992: 684-685). Hegel's criticism of Catholicism shows that God cannot be characterized as an objective presence which is in no way related to the World, and which expects from human beings to obey the rules that he implements in the same way as the Roman Emperor did to his subjects. In this line of thought, it can easily be said that the idea of incarnation becomes threatened. Because, it becomes very hard to assert that such a God that Catholics has cannot be taken as an “element” that is relevant to incarnation. That is to say, Catholicism, so to speak, jeopardizes Jesus' being as the Son of God, which is very important for the doctrine of Trinity.

Incarnation, for Hegel, can only be possible if we take God and believer in a relationship that both parties constitute as a harmonious or organic whole which is very central to Hegelian way of thinking. Thus, religion cannot be understood from this point of view as a believer's “consciousness of the absolute” (Wendte, 2005: 3). It is more than this in the sense that God is also “a player in the same game”. This sharing the same ground is the reason of the fact that “mankind has its nature in being spirit” (Wendte, 2005: 7). This shares the same meaning with the verse in Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> This guarantees the condition that the connection between God and man is not impossible. In this regard, Hegel's critique of Kant is directed to Kant's characterization of God as an idea which is necessary for practical reason (Redding, 2007: 52). Kantian way of leaving a room for faith means that, like Catholicism, Kant also prevents human beings from forming a relationship with the divine even if he intends something other than that of Catholicism. In addition to this, Hegel does not aim to define this relation in terms of a “feeling”, since he wants to see the feeling in conformity to the reason as a whole which establishes a harmony and a reciprocal relationship (Redding, 2007: 56). It can be deduced that Hegel wants to save the religion from misunderstanding which takes religion as an impossible attempt to apprehending the divine, and as the

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3. Genesis, 1: 26, “Let us make men to our image and likeness”.

only way of having a relation with the divine through feeling (Wendte, 2005: 10). In conformity with this understanding of religion, incarnation is a condition which symbolizes active relation with the God as a consequence of the dialectical relation between man and God. In the example of incarnation God becomes man and, by virtue of this, original sin is forgiven by him. Forgiveness can be seen as one of the modes of relation between God and believer. It is occurred by the very act of God. Hegel sees this action as the manifestation of self-consciousness of God (Redding, 2007: 57). If we assert that there is a dialectical relation between God and believer in Hegelian sense, then God, as one of the parties in this relation, should get involved in the process which moves from consciousness to self-consciousness. As mentioned above, God, in its essential being, is “in-and-for-itself”, which means that at this stage he is conscious. To be self-conscious, that is, to be fully aware of its existence, God must be ascended to the earth as Jesus (Redding, 2007: 58). However, incarnation makes divine related to the human beings, the death of Jesus as divine being can be seen as the loss of connection with the divine. At this point, Hegel urges that the third element of doctrine of the Trinity serves, so to speak, as a factor, in some sense, to guarantee the relation between God and man. Holy Spirit, by continuing its role in the presence of “authority” -in other words, Christian community- as a part of the divine triad enables the interaction between the divine and human beings (Redding, 2007: 55). The process of incarnation and Hegel’s understanding of doctrine of Trinity gives us the picture of how dialectic works on God’s part. Incarnation enables him to negate itself by being a human, and by virtue of Holy Spirit dialectic moves beyond the level of first negation and becomes the negation of negation which is central to the idea of the dialectic in Hegelian thought.

On the side of the believer, there should be awareness that a particular human being has that s/he comes to the realization of the fact that he / she is not a God. This is the inner struggle that one faces in the process of having faith in God (Luther and Hoover, 1981: 240). In consequence of this inner struggle, human beings become faithful in the sense that they see themselves as being other than God who has the characteristic of infinitude compared to the finiteness of human beings. The result of the inner struggle is the limitation in the understanding of human beings as not having divine characteristics that God has. This claim can be refuted on the ground that

“man is made in the image of God”. However, here the goal of claiming that human beings are not divine as much as God means that human beings are also in the process of becoming divine when unifying with the spirit which is embodied in the community of Christians. Also, it should be added that the image of God of which man is made, so to speak, intrinsically is present in human beings who at the end manifest itself in the union with the divine. While God as spirit makes its way from divine to mundane / secular / profane, human beings are on the way to reach the level of the divine. That is to say, “Spirit empties itself of Spirit so as to become flesh and flesh negates itself as flesh so as to become Spirit” (Altizer and Hamilton, 1966: 154). The principle that makes self-consciousness possible is obviously at work here. Enjoying the nature that differentiates itself -also in Hegelian sense we can easily call Spirit as desire or life to a larger extent- spirit enables God and believer to get in a dialectical relation in which both parties share this characteristic of spirit. Human beings get involved in a dialogue with the divine and are provided with the opportunity to keep this dialogue as long as they want to be a part of the dialogue.

As the main motivator of self-consciousness on both sides, desire makes both of them self-conscious. Actually, it can be said that in such a relationship, desiring to make oneself known can be put in the place of demand of self-consciousness, since one cannot individually be self-conscious of oneself. Like in master-slave dialectic, life-and-death struggle can also be taken in order to make the relation between God and believer clear. It is very easy to reach the conclusion that God who is by definition an omnipotent is the source of death, so to speak, as well as source of life. In this context, believer is in the place of slave or bondsman and God is in that of Lord. The point of the struggle of life and death seems to be giving us a chance to criticize the application of the master-slave dialectic to the relation between God and believer.

However, I think that this struggle cannot be taken as a model in explaining the relation between God and believer. Because God is an agent who is from the beginning the Lord and, in effect, believer is the slave / bondsman. There is a predetermination in the relationship between God and believer which signifies God, as omnipotent being, as responsible of this situation. It is true that God also becomes God in the process of incarnation and be-

comes self-conscious of himself but this does not mean that both God and believer begins from the same point of departure as in the master-slave dialectic. The desire to incarnate can also be seen as a response to the original sin that mankind committed. But again this is so because God wants it to be in this way. The point is that master-slave dialectic is helpful in understanding the nature of the relationship between God and believer. However, the initial asymmetry that is lacking in master-slave dialectic provides us with the assertion that dialectical relation between God and believer cannot be grounded on the master-slave dialectic.

### **Conclusion**

It should be said that Hegelian master-slave dialectic is very influential for an understanding of the nature of self-consciousness. It is also very helpful in engaging with the difficult questions both of religion and of philosophy: how is one related to many or how does divine interact with the world and human beings? Hegel's master-slave dialectic proposes an answer which has certain deficiencies, especially, in explicating the nature of the relation between God and believer. I tried to demonstrate why this dialectic can mislead us in understanding how God and believer interact. I would like to add some finishing remarks. Firstly, I can claim that if incarnation is not believed as one of the tenets of religion before Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Hegel's idea of God can be seen as mistaken in the sense that it violates the very nature of God's being. That is to say, God cannot be needed to reach a level of consciousness like a human being. Besides this point, making desire so central can lead to view God as a being bound to desire and act accordingly. It can be claimed that this is the reason why God interacts with the believer in a dialectical way, since it is not a construction of Hegel's mind. God is the very principle of life, creation, history, the way that spirit reveals itself in the world (Caputo, 1992: 134). However, at this time, it is not very absurd to claim that in this definition, God is bound to the dialectic itself and this contradicts again the very conception of God.<sup>4</sup>

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4. I am aware that Hegel conception of God includes contradictions, but it seems to me that that this conception is dominated with the idea of incarnation as something thought of in connection between human beings and God. This can be seen as an at-

## Hegel'in Köle-Efendi Diyalektiği ve Tanrı ile İnanan Arasındaki İlişki

**Özet:** Hegel, *Fenomenoloji* adlı eserinde özbilinci arzu olarak karakterize ediyor ve bilincin nasıl iki bilincin etkileşimi sonucu özbilinç seviyesine yükseldiğini efendi-köle ilişkisi üzerinden anlatıyor. Bu çalışmada öncelikle efendi-köle diyalektiğini ve bu diyalektiğin Tanrı ve insan arasındaki ilişkileri açıklamada yardımcı olup olmayacağını inceleyeceğim. İkinci olarak da eğer bu diyalektik söz konusu ilişkileri anlamada başarısız olursa, bunun sebebini açıklamaya çalışacağım. Hegel'in efendi-köle diyalektiği hem özbilincin doğasını anlama hem de din ve felsefenin oldukça zor sorularıyla uğraşırken faydalıdır: bir nasıl çokla ilişkilendirir ya da ilahi olan dünya ve insanlarla nasıl ilişki kurar? Hegel'in efendi-köle diyalektiğinin bu sorulara cevabı bazı açılardan sorunludur. Burada bizi ilgilendiren sorunu ise Tanrı ve insan arasındaki ilişkinin doğasıyla alakalıdır. Sonuç olarak işte bu diyalektiğin Tanrı ve insanın etkileşimini anlama yolunda bizi nasıl yanlış bir yola sevk edeceğini göstermeye çalışacağım.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hegel, Köle-Efendi Diyalektiği, Tanrı, İnanan

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tempt to move beyond the conceptualization of God exemplified in the idea of the divine as in Catholicism or in Kantian system. But, in order for God to constitute such a relation and maintain it with human beings or the world, incarnation is not needed. Thus, I can argue that God is limited to dialectic in the case of incarnation.

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