

Master/Slave Dialectics, Negativity, and the Quest for Sovereignty.

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ABSTRACT

The ontological problem, or the conceptualization of the essence of the being, in practice, puts the relation between the individual subject and the collective in conflicting position. For a better understanding of the conflict, Bataille and Marx reevaluate the famous Hegel's dialectic between the Master and the Slave. Hegel designed a total system where the individual, in his search for sovereignty, shall pass the stages from negation to affirmation. The basic negativity (death as a destruction of the individual existence) will be double negated with human devotion to work and the "future" as a project. The unhappy consciousness of humanity will be eliminated by focusing on some projected goal. The goal, lying ahead in the future, becomes a project—a historical movement in the perfection of the Spirit towards Absolute Knowledge.

When the history is completed then the negativity will be left useless, or in his terms we shall have *negativity without employment*. The problem will be additionally evaluated on the epistemological and anthropological level. The former deals with the creation of the sovereign object—the object of truth that guarantees the stability of the structure of the subject; in the case of Hegel that perfect object is the Absolute Knowledge. The latter deals with the subject-object relation at the level of the desire of the subject, and his attempt to reach the sovereignty. I contend that only through aesthetics can negativity be properly grasped and justified. In Nietzschean terms, the horror of the Dionysian can only be presented through the beautifully consoling and dreamy illusions of the Apollonian.

(Keywords: master, slave, Hegel, Marx, Bataille, ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, noise, anthropology, alienation)

INTRODUCTION

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel asserts that the basic task of philosophy is to unravel the movement (the dialectics) of the appearance of the knowledge and the truth. Epistemologically speaking, the perfect object is the truth of the knowledgeable subject. In principle, knowledge has to go "beyond itself" through several negations. The final step that has to be achieved is the moment when the knowledge does not need to go beyond itself: the absolute knowledge corresponds to the full realization of the self-consciousness. The absolute knowledge claims that behind the appearances of the objects lies the knowledge itself: thus, the necessity to negate the objective world.

The same process follows the development of the Spirit. Spirit learns by becoming. In other words, it learns by manifestation of itself in objective form (through religion, state, morality). That way, the distinction between the Spirit and the objective world is surpassed, as the Spirit gets the identity in the world. That is an identity in what essentially opposes it—an identity in difference: the process should continually be repeated until Spirit finds itself at home in its negation. The crucial moment for Hegel is to state the fact that the Spirit is not just present beside us to discover it: it has to be actively pursued. The manifestation of the Spirit through its becoming and its eventual creation through loss needs a constant mental labor or as Arthur nicely puts it, "Spirit comes to know itself through producing itself" (Arthur, 1983).

The final result for Hegel would be to establish the dialectics as the prime principle that moves (makes Spirit or knowledge or Desire manifest). That dialectics is the dialectics of negativity. Thus, in the operation of the negative dialectics, the crucial issue is to properly establish the supreme object that the subject should attain through the process of negativity and to define the workings of the recognition stage in the

dialectics of the Master and the Slave. These two issues firmly divide the positions of Hegel, Marx, Bataille, and to some extent, Atali; I will posit that their difference lies in the position they undertake: Hegel's is strictly philosophical in nature—applicable on the theoretical but hardly on the practical level; Marx's position is more practical, historically mediated application; Bataille's anthropological—challenging the limits of human knowledge and being; Atali's is an aesthetic position but with a clear economic and political overtones.

THE SOVEREIGN OBJECT

Absolute knowledge is what Hegel envisioned as the perfect sovereign object—the one that holds the promise of the truth, and towards which the self-consciousness inclines to. From the anthropological point of view, that supreme object is the Desire itself. At its core, the Desire is an empty place. For Hegel, the nature of the Object of desire determines the nature of the Subject's desire. The problem Hegel faced was how to get a positive outcome of something that, being hollow and empty, carries no affirmation. His answer was to try to copy the content of the Desire, and turn the desiring subject into an empty, repressed subject that, by negating his desire, will satisfy the truth of the Desire. Thus, Desire can have a positive aspect and can be introduced into subject's domain. The negation of the Subject will in turn produce the negation of the Object: accordingly, the dialectics will produce positive outcome. Hegel's dialectics is essentially cognitive-pure philosophical speculation where the otherness of the object will be sublated once the desiring subject recognizes the desire of the other as his own.

The other way to outwit desire is to utterly destroy its object. In the animal world, that is achieved by the eating or killing of other animal. For humans though, in the path towards the self-consciousness, a simple killing or eating will not do. That other cannot be simply killed: he must stay alive to reveal the negativity of the subject. The object of the desire is social, which means that the satisfaction of the desire depends on the recognition of the desire of the other. And this is where Hegel steps up with the Master/Slave dialectics.

HEGEL'S MASTER/SLAVE DIALECTICS

The concept is based on the premise that in search for the essence of the self-consciousness, man has to be recognized by the others. The "struggle for recognition" is a struggle between the identity of your consciousness of your-self and the difference in your consciousness-being conscious of the others in the society. In the case of Master/Slave relation, it is logical that the Slave, being dependent on the Master, puts himself in the position of an unthinking object. The Master, ironically, needs the Slave in order to recognize his position of dominance, but is unable to recognize the Slave as a conscious subject that will recognize him as other. In other words, consciousness cannot reach recognition of itself through objects or things. Quite the contrary, following Hegel's dialectics, its prime objective is to negate the world of things.

There is also something fundamental that, according to Hegel, gives more profit to the Slave. The need for recognition in his dialectic is mutual. Since Master needs recognition from the Slave but does not recognize Slave as a conscious being, he gets nothing in this mirror-like game of recognition. As the one who puts his life at risk, facing death, he gets an unequal exchange. His only motion is to put the Slave to work but the very process has a grave consequence for him. As Gernerchak (2003) posits, "one degrades itself, in degrading the other" (p.47).

In the process though, the Slave will use the Master as the supreme object. The other (the Master), who negates himself (by risking his life), and has an empty desire (for no-thing) is the perfect Object that the Slave recognizes in order to develop his self-consciousness. The Slave, on the other hand, through the Master, gets the recognition of death which is essential for the development of his self-consciousness. He is facing the negativity indirectly though, and he realizes his Sovereignty through hard work and the refashioning of the world (the Object).

To sum up: In Hegel's system, the Slave represses the desire and outwits the Master who has no anxiety at all, spending his time instantaneously. Hegel is in favor of the Slave that will live through the struggle for recognition and fear of death (the unhappy consciousness), and through work (all activities directed towards

the future) will transcend his anxiety into “the sovereignty of Absolute Knowledge”.

MARX’S MASTER/SLAVE DIALECTICS

Following Hegel, Marx will use this Master/Slave dialectic to posit his basic premise for the necessity of the revolution or the class-struggle, in cases when one class is exploiting the other. For Marx, “the labor of the negative” should not be focused on the mental, but on the material level.

Marx claims that man creates himself through his own labor. The working activity for Marx has “ontological significance”, that is, it becomes ground for the realization of the truth of man. Following Hegel, he asserts that the working man (the Slave)—in the process of his creation—has to initially pass the stages of alienation. The first stage of alienation starts when the individual labor—in order to enter the homogenous system of exchange (the market)—has to be abstracted. As a consequence, the individual laborer—in order to satisfy his needs—has to enter and support the system of the generalized exchange. He has to surrender his particular time to the abstract social time of the capitalist production. Finally, he has to organize his whole social life not directly, but through the mediation of the market. There, according to Marx, lies the essence of alienation.

What is the main difference between Marx and Hegel, in regards the alienation process? Hegel posits that the Spirit, in its recognition stage, objectifies itself but, in the process of objectification Spirit alienates from itself. In short, Hegel gives negative connotation to everything that the Spirit has to face outside of itself, hence, “consciousness (the Spirit) becomes aware that it need not identify itself with any particular work, that it is universal because it is 'absolute negativity' in so far as it withdraws itself from any determinate or particular work” (Hegel, 1977).

Marx makes clear distinction between the objectification and alienation. Both are mediations, meaning that the Spirit (or the working man, in Marx) is separated from the immediate experience of its true nature. Still, as Marx asserts, there is an important difference between the two mediations. The first mediation—which in principle is man’s separation from nature through work—is necessary (both for Hegel and Marx), since it creates the ontological fundament for the development of the Spirit or the worker. Only by being estranged from itself can the Spirit know itself, and only through productive activity can the worker realize himself.

Marx does not see this mediation as negative. He claims that man—in the process of his realization—has to refashion the nature and by doing that, he makes himself creatively different. So, the objectification is both necessary and affirmative.

The second order of mediation though (the division of labor, time, property, wages...) is what alienates man from nature. Thus, the first mediation unites, while the second one separates man and nature. For Marx, the first order is ontological in nature, while the second one is historically constructed. Logically, the only changes may occur within the second mediation, and this is where he places his theory of historical materialism.

When speaking about the relation of Master and Slave in the alienated form—that is, in the capitalist mode of production—Marx sees the basic distinction as related to the private property and the ownership. He says:

Capital is the power to command labor and its products. The capitalist possesses this power not on account of his personal or human properties but in so far as he is the owner of capital. His power is the purchasing power of his capital, which nothing can withstand. (quoted in Arthur, 1986).

The worker, being dependent to the capital for his survival, enters the system of constant dependence. The difference is crucial: whereas the earlier dependence (in the pre-capitalist system) was personal (the peasant in relation to the specific landlord) now it is completely impersonal (the worker in relation to capital). Arthur (1986) summarizes:

In feudalism there is the appearance of a meaningful unity between the individual and the means of production in that land is individuated with its lord and its serfs - just this particular estate is his and they belong to it. Hence the proverb: 'No land without its lord.' Developed private property, by contrast, has an abstractly universal form: value. One can put one's wealth 'into anything - factories, land, works of art-without ceasing to be 'worth' so much. Money dissolves all feudal fixity and we find the modern saying 'Money has no master' expressing the absolute contingency of the relationship

between property and personality.
(Chapter 2)

In the system, organized around the pillars of private property, the individual labor is at the most extreme form of alienation since the activity of production and the very product of labor are not in relation with labor itself. When the object (the labored product) is lost, then the very process of productive activity is seen as tedious, boring and completely unsatisfactory for the laborer. You work not for pleasure but in order to make up for survival.

The invention of money conceals the individual labor and introduces the world of things. Money, commodities and things direct the social action and the individuals. The laborers, by not being able to control the things, end up being controlled by them. For Marx, this level of alienation is created by the capitalist consumption when the demand controls the needs. In the latest stages of capitalism—when the level of abstraction has surpassed even Marx’s wildest predictions—the abstract capital morphs into an image.

When the authentic communication is replaced by a communication through abstract representation, the organic society has effectively ceased to exist. Marx claims that the collective, when alienated from the individual, takes the whole power for itself. The improvement of worker’s life does not solve the alienation. Marx posits that higher wages, “would therefore be nothing but better payment for the slave, and would not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity” (Marx, 1844).

On a fundamental level, Marx renounces Hegel’s insistence for the end of history by the collapse of the opposites into the unity of the absolute negativity. This abstraction, for Marx is unacceptable, for the proletariat—unable to unite the opposition between the subject (the laborer) and the other (alienated labor)—calls for “the dialectic of human practice as historical and open-ended” (Arthur, 1986).

In other words, Marx’s solution to the problem does not lie in Hegel’s spiritual need for the constant mental labor of the consciousness, but in the change in the mode of production. The worker (the Slave) through his political action (class struggle) and the change of consciousness will abolish his alienation in the capitalist society.

BATAILLE’S MASTER/SLAVE DIALECTICS

Bataille reverses the dialectic. To him, the Slave’s avoidance to confront the unhappy consciousness and the focus of his time towards the future makes his life absurd. Being devoid of the total understanding of life, he must continuously construct meaning to each separate activity in his life. The link that connects all the disparate elements of his existence into a seemingly wholeness is created by labor and production. This is a closed circle, a trap, which effectively denies his existence for some lingering and unspecified moment in the future.

The Master, on the other hand, accepts the negativity and puts his life at risk. He does not have to make meaning of all the elements that constitute his existence, but revels in the intrusion of his desire into the areas beyond meaning. His object of desire—by not being projected—is easily transgressed and the very excessiveness of his negation (desire) opens him up to the workings of the sacred time. The sacred time is the unproductive, non-labor time, not dependent of others’ recognition, where one transgresses one’s limits and employs the negativity in a sovereign way, without any definite goal. Psychologically speaking, the Slave has to repress his desires in order to put all his energy at the service of the relentless forward projection of his existence. The Master lets his desire be excessive in order to illuminate his path towards the sudden revelation of the Sacred.

SOVEREIGNTY

The concept of sovereignty was developed by Bataille, again on the premises on Hegelian philosophy. Bataille’s idea of sovereignty—although based on Hegel—presents a complete reversal of Hegel’s conceptualization. Bataille initially follows Hegel, qualifying man as negativity (through his desire for transcendence). He also perceives revolutionary potential in man due to his basic negativity which is always a possibility for revolutionary action.

Nevertheless, Bataille attacks Hegel’s idea of the total system, where the affirmation will be achieved through adherence to the working mentality, and the negativity will be left unemployed. Bataille strives to give *employment to the negativity* (to heterogeneous elements that are suppressed in order for the homogeneity of the system to operate). To put it differently: he

strives to open the system for the difference that is not subordinated to the workings of the identity of the closed Hegelian system. Accordingly, the crucial Bataillean concepts like sacrifice, unproductive expenditure, transgression, the useless and the sacred, are clearly in collision with the strictly productive Hegelian system.

Sovereignty of Time

Bataille's most energetic attack on the Hegelian system is directed towards the idea of the anticipated result in the future, as a way to postpone man's confrontation with negativity of the death. This orientation towards the future carries not only philosophical, but also economic implications. Bataille gives special importance to the ceremony of the sacrifice in the primitive societies where the victim (the thing) is gloriously taken away from utility and the inclination towards the future. The complete focus is on present time—the time of the sacred.

Bataille acknowledges the historical developments of consciousness in relation to time and sovereignty. The primitive people were the masters of their own time—the hunters ate the animals as soon as they killed them. Nothing was left for the future and that is what makes these people sovereign in the true sense of the word. What they lacked though, was the consciousness of the sovereignty, and that is what Bataille distinguishes as the most important trait of sovereignty. Modern man, on the other hand, possesses *reified consciousness*, which means he is conscious of everything except of itself—that does not qualify him for the position of sovereignty. His time is useful time, leaving no space for the unproductive glorification of the present moment.

Bataille looks at the people from feudal times as the ones who possessed the perfect balance of time and consciousness. The King (the Sovereign) was given the privilege to represent sovereignty while the others were aware of the loss of their sovereignty by being servile to the King.

Hegel's concept about the primacy of future time led to massive fragmentation of time that, in the process, fragmented the humanity into separate individuals. The only unity is to be found in the totality of the history that will be realized as a projected end, sometime in the future. Bataille

comments on this, "activity which subordinates each instant of our lives to some precise result effaces the individual's total character... I can exist totally only by transcending in some way the stage of action" (Bataille, *Sovereignty*, in Botting and Wilson, 1997).

Speaking about the fragmented time of the modern man Bataille contends: "His time becomes a progression toward the goal (that is what we usually call living)" (Botting and Wilson, 1997). To realize history one has to lose his sovereignty. In this, Bataille is clearly against Hegel but, also against Marxist dialectics of history.

MASTER/SLAVE AND THE AESTHETIC THEORY

The Master/Slave dialectics represents the classical Hegelian concept in the development of the Spirit, where the individual is defined through its negation. Negativity is defined as a process and not as state. Negativity is the oblique definition of the law, being defined as something that it is not, something that can be defined only by its opposite term. Negativity, according to Hegel, serves to develop the Spirit; therefore it is as a prerequisite for the development of the society.

In aesthetic theory, when the negativity is sublated, it becomes a positive term, a norm-music. For Jacques Attali, the establishment of the Master/Slave relation—the way Hegel envisioned it—requires a representational simulacrum, whose ultimate form in the history of the tonal music was that of an orchestra. The conductor, taking the role of the Master, directs the eyes and the skills of the musicians, creating the perfect replica of the relation between the ruler and the ruled. The Master becomes the moral compass of the society that follows the leader. The unity of the opposing differences is always already resolved at the pure representational level. The absolute knowledge allows for the conscious subject to sublimate the disharmony of the Negativity. This view situates Hegel's thought in relation to the spectacular discourses of the revolutions and the grandiose harmonic enterprises of the nineteenth century, culminating in the great symphonies and operas of the time. His insistence on the representational simulacrum was, to certain extent, justified. For Jonathan Strauss, the representational strategies

of the Master/Slave relation and the development of the harmonic order are created not by choice, but out of necessity. In the ultimate phase of the Master's confrontation with the negativity, the Master undergoes the process of utter dismemberment and the loss of the self. Still, the loss of self requires little consciousness, otherwise the whole relation will collapse, or in the words of Bataille, (1997) "Death itself would have to become (self) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the consciousness being...So, it must be, at all cost that man live at the moment that he really dies, or that he live with the impression of really dying" (p. 287).

This is where the necessity of the simulacrum takes place. The Master/Slave dialectics-that of the Master, facing his own annihilation at the core of his identity, serves to mask the real death. The whole representational strategy, therefore, from the primitive staging of the ritual to the conductor/orchestra relation and up to the modern day spectacles and festivals, serves to present the un-representable of the non-being into the consciousness of the being.

CONCLUSION

Hegel's Slave is the working Slave and all his activities and existence are succumbed to productive life and towards the profanity of the world. He is forever dependent on the recognition of the other (The Master), until his self-consciousness brings him to the level of dominance, and when the struggle for recognition (the class struggle released in History, according to Marx) elevates him to the status of suspected freedom (the negativity without employment). But, in the process, the Slave confronts the "absolute Master" that will command him till the rest of his life. This Master is death itself, and in its shadow, Slave's life—having to live death in life—is full of pain and anxiety.

Bataille's Master, on the other hand, is not dependent on any Object or recognition to explain his existence. His activities are beyond any productivity and action and that way, they are effectively beyond the unfolding of the historical processes. Since his desire does not strive towards the meaning or the thing, he is free of the unhappy consciousness of the Slave. The Master, being indifferent to lose-even his own life- "does not take death seriously".

At the level of aesthetics, the Master/Slave relation is presented through the simulacrum. Art does not resolve the issue on the abstract level of the consciousness, nor at the level of the historical process unraveled in the future: art simulates the loss of individuality in the transgressive confrontation with the zone of the sacred but, being a simulation only, it allows for the subject the conscious appropriation of the negativity (the death) without a recourse to it. Art is the privileged site of the experience where one may face the truth of the existence without being swallowed by its negativity. Both as a site of truth and as a soother, art transfigures and overcomes the subject-object divide, making our existence worthy and bearable. Or as Nietzsche would say it, "...it is only as an aesthetic phenomena that existence and the world are truly justified" (Nietzsche, 1994).

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