

# Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic and Sexual Oppression

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## **Abstract:**

This essay seeks to cast light on the origins on patriarchy by an analysis of Hegel's "Master-Slave Dialectic", in particular its conclusion that mutual recognition and self-consciousness emerge out of violent conflict, a phenomenon more common among male than female animals.

Hegel was not a feminist. He wrote at one point that women are related to men as plants are to animals. And yet if nobody else has ever fully understood all the implications of Hegelian philosophy, why should we imagine that Hegel did? In this essay I want to develop a feminist interpretation of Hegel master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, and in so doing to use Hegel's philosophy to answer a question central to feminism, namely, the origin and basis of patriarchy itself.

Different answers have been developed to this question by various writers, often making reference to men's supposedly greater physical strength and the inconveniences of child-bearing and rearing. These may well be true, but I feel that certain further issues are important. To fully appreciate the oddness of patriarchy we might make some observations.

Firstly, among humans self-adornment, concern with appearance, and a sense of being-looked-at are overwhelmingly associated with women. Women, not men, expend a lot of energy, money and time on looking good, and judgements of their appearance are often given a weight substantially greater than judgements of men's appearance. But among all other animals, the sex that plays this role is either neither, or it is males. It is male peacocks, for example, who display spectacular plumage to tempt females, not the other way around. The same holds true of other birds, of fish, or reptiles and mammals and insects. Wherever there are courtship displays they are made by males.

A similar point can be made more generally. It is male deer, not female deer, who grow large and, for non-sexual purposes, useless and costly, antlers, solely for the sake of competing for females. It is, in general, male animals that must exert energy and bear costs to compete for, and hence in a way make themselves dependent on, female animals. And even the greater size of some male animals manifests itself principally in polygamous species where those males must fight each other to breed – in pair-bonding species, or species where males do not need to be large and strong to breed, the sexes are either equal in size, or females are larger. Yet among humans, in almost all societies (with the modern one a very debatable exception) the dependence of women on men far outweighs the dependence of men on women. Women need to battle each other for male attention in order to have financial security and social status – whereas men can remain largely aloof from any concern with women and still be accounted great successes and secure themselves material plenty.

There are certainly contrary indications, most notably the fact that where there are status hierarchies within animal societies, there are very often males at the top – male lions, for example, dominate their pride and get first access to any kill. Yet this

still co-exists with the fact that the status hierarchy itself has a bigger impact on the males.

In summary – human patriarchy seems to be, in many respects, a direct reversal of the more widespread situation among animals. To understand this a little better we might ask why the situation among non-human animals, the relative dependence of males and independence of females, is as it is. To this a fairly easy answer can be given: the nature of our reproductive systems is such that males must compete with each other, while females need not. And in this case as in general, internal division and conflict weakens a group. So why is it that among humans this weakness of the male sex, its drive to internal strife, has somehow given birth to its overwhelming strength and dominance? Merely to phrase the question in this way is to recall Hegel, who famously located the struggle between people as the seed of higher developments of self-consciousness.

So let us consider section of Hegel's work that explicitly deals with this, often called the 'Master-Slave Dialectic'. In this, two consciousnesses encounter each other – both are referred to by Hegel as 'he' (when not in neuter terms) and I will do the same for reasons that will become apparent. Hegel describes this experience, the encountering of another consciousness, as profoundly ambiguous, as having a double meaning. On the one hand, each consciousness sees in the other simply another object – a thing of identifiable size and appearance, perhaps useful, perhaps dangerous, that to be ascertained. But basically just one more thing for me, the great and wonderful consciousness, to perceive, understand, judge, act on, and conquer.

On the other hand, each also sees in the other a rival consciousness, an experience which is inseparable from coming to see themselves as an object. I am now something of identifiable size and appearance, because that creature there can see me. I am something that may be useful, or dangerous, to that creature there. My nature is to be ascertained – by that creature perceiving, understanding, judging, me. And then to be acted on and conquered. As Sartre puts it, in describing the same double-meaning later on in *Being and Nothingness*, the world ceases to be centred on me, it flows away to a new, different centre, and I become something existing at its periphery.

Hegel seems to suggest that each consciousness is likely to dislike the second aspect of the experience, and to want to resist it somehow, to re-assert that no, I am consciousness, everything that exists is an object for me, you are simply a thing. The particular form in which this happens, he says, is a struggle to the death – both

creatures try to kill the other. Why does this form of activity somehow prove the consciousness (or, we might say, the personhood) of the struggling creatures?

It is a philosophical commonplace to say that there are two forms of causation – causation through physical objects and causation through human (or animal) actions. Even if we think this distinction is metaphysically wrong, we must still admit it's great importance as an everyday way to relate to things. And we may observe that physical causation takes the form of an input and a predictable output – the bullet flew from the gun because it was moved by the explosion, the explosion happened because the trigger was pulled, etc. Whereas the choice to pull the trigger – that, in some sense, “starts itself”, it was not the transmission of some other input, it was a decision the person took themselves.

A person's action can be made to conform to the nature of physical causation if they follow predictably from certain inputs, for in such a case, if one knows the right inputs, one can manipulate and control them as one would any other tool. The most obvious way to do this is by threats: ‘do this’ we say ‘or I will take your thumbs.’ As long as we can threaten something sufficiently bad, we can (we hope) make the person do whatever we want. We can then forget about their choices, their free will, and simply regard them as an object, a tool.

The struggle to the death is the rejection of manipulability. For if I am trying to kill you, then clearly you would do anything you can do to make me stop – i.e. the severity of the threat I present to you implies that if I can continue to fight, you must be positively unable to stop me. And if you are trying to kill me, then clearly you cannot threaten me with anything worse – i.e. the severity of the threat you present to me implies that if I continue to fight, you must be positively unable to stop me. So together, the reciprocal threats of death represent the strongest possible case for you to manipulate and control me. And yet you do not – I continue to fight you. Hence you cannot control me, cannot manipulate me. I stand independent of any material concern, even my own death. My will, my determination and resolve, are elevated above the whole world. Thus I prove my personhood. This idea, it should be noted, is a fairly common one – that it is by struggle that we ‘prove ourselves’, is something that plenty of people otherwise very different Georg Hegel have affirmed.

But of course, taking a critical step back from Hegel's writings, we might consider the obvious fact that animals and humans actually quite rarely fight. Typically, when two creatures meet, they will either ignore each other, or one will run away. Sometimes they will respond with spontaneous friendship. So we should not interpret Hegel as

saying that the most common way for any consciousnesses to interact is by trying to kill each other. Rather, he is focusing on this scenario because this is the form of interaction that leads to greater development of consciousness. The reason for this, presumably, is that it involves the active demonstration of each participant's personhood – it clarifies that and brings it into sharp relief. If we spontaneously feel a liking for someone, we are still basing our concern for them on our own feelings, which may change or fluctuate. The struggle teaches us that the other person is independent and cannot be ignored, however we might feel about them. This forces us to work out ways to interact that are more enduring and stable, able to continue even when we strongly dislike each other.

But what happens next?

One possibility, quite common in conflicts between creatures of different species, is that one of them gets killed (and, quite possibly, eaten). This is however quite rare when the combatants are the same species, since most such conflicts are heavily ritualised, and may not involve any actual conflict. Another possibility is that the two simply separate, possibly with one running away. But the most interesting and significant possibility, and the one Hegel focuses on, is that one combatant, driven by the fear of death, surrenders to the other and says, or implicitly communicates, something like "I will do whatever you say, just let me live." In doing so, Hegel argues, it fails in the project of proving its personhood and thus 'admits' its own objecthood to the winner, also thereby recognising their claim to be a person, a consciousness.

But how, precisely, does this state of objectification work out? For Hegel it is through enslavement, i.e. putting the loser to work, having them labour for the winner. But this is only one form of objectification, 'instrumental objectification', the turning of a human being into a tool. What Hegel does not discuss is an option that is in some ways more like the first, of 'eating' the loser. For what one eats is an object, what one drinks or enjoys looking at or enjoys lying on – all these are objects, but not tools. Rather, they are objects of desire. And one way that a person could be objectified would be by turning them into, and reducing them to, an object of sexual desire. That is, one outcome of the submission of the loser is rape, and if that arrangement of rape is prolonged and made formal and permanent, made into an ongoing state of sexual ownership mixed with absolute domination, then it is marriage. Some will no doubt protest at the association of the wonderful and benign institution of marriage with sexual violence, but I do not think it can be denied that, as individual consent as a precondition of marriage is relatively rare in history, and as for almost all of history sex

within marriage has been independent of any question of consent, consequently the historically most prevalent form of marriage is as something suffused with violence.

To see the significance of this we can consider how the structure of a ‘marriage’ of this sort differs from the structure of enslavement, as Hegel describes it. Superficially, or in its goals, the state of enslavement that Hegel describes is one in which the master is supremely a person and the slave is supremely a thing. The master enjoys and repeatedly affirms that he is greater than and more powerful than mere nature, for he can make things happen, not by having to work, and engage his body and his understanding of physics, but rather by simply speaking: he says “let there be light”, and there is light. Whereas the slave is completely subservient to mere nature, for he cannot make there be light simply by demanding it, but only by submitting himself to learning the rules of fire and then working according to them. This true both concretely, in the power they have to produce results, and symbolically, in that one respects, admires, and praises the other, while the other gives no recognition or respect in return.

And yet, Hegel argues, the real situation is in some ways the opposite of this, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the master is dependent on the slave – though the master has greater power, he has that power only because the slave continues to obey him. But the slave’s power, such as it is, does not depend on the master. Secondly, the master cannot really get the recognition and respect he craves, for the respect he gets is from the slave, and he does not himself see the slave as having any status, and hence any ability to give recognition. Thirdly, the master’s domination, which is meant to prove his superiority and his independence of the world, actually rests of various contingent facts – that he was strong enough to win the fight, or that he has burly guards, or that there are chains on the slave’s feet, or some such. Fourthly, in practical terms, the master’s position is prone to give him no particular impetus to reflection or self-awareness, because all he has to do is express his immediate desire and then enjoy its satisfaction. The slave, on the other hand, is exposed to a number of pressures that seem to generate greater self-knowledge. The slave, after all, has done the work, and so sees the product (the sculpted statue, the built house, etc.) as a representative of his own activity – the plans he had to make, the facts he had to learn, the effort he had to exert, all stand before him in their concrete outcome. At the same time, he must suppress his own desires in order to obey his master’s will, and in

doing so must observe and become aware of his own thoughts and feeling in a more reflective way than if he just acted on them.

For all these reasons, the situation is inherently unstable. Not only because, as a matter of fact, it is false to imagine a gulf separating the master (a person) and the slave (a thing), but also because the tendencies of the arrangement themselves work to slowly make this clear – to make it clear by bringing out, however much the master and the slave who obeys him might struggle to deny it and delude themselves, that the real power belongs to the slave, and that the master, far from being the most important, most powerful, most awesome, is in fact... a parasite. Hence the struggle goes on – the forms it takes need not concern us, nor Hegel's particular view of them. It is enough to witness the endless roundabout of revolutions, wars, upheavals and political turmoil that stem from this basic idiocy at the bottom of society.

Yet all those revolutions, wars, upheavals and political turmoil seem to involve men killing other men. How is the situation of that other slave, the wife, different? If the key activity of the male slave was his labour, the key activity of the female slave is her sexual abuse. This first activity, Hegel seems to suggest, generates in him a consciousness of himself as active, as powerful, as a person, for in it he masters raw nature. But the consciousness generated by the sexual abuse of the female slave is likely to be precisely the opposite, for here she is not the actor, she is not powerful, she does not achieve anything. Her master acts on her. Moreover the labour of the male slave affirms his basic similarity with the master – they both act on and thus control nature. The sexual abuse of the female slave reinforces her basic difference from the master, for it focuses attention on the aspects of their bodies that are most different. If this is the case, we might expect her psyche to be more completely adjusted to this state of objectification. And since any human life must feature pleasures and satisfactions, if only as a contrast to other experiences, she is likely to come to find pleasure and satisfaction in being an object, in being beautiful, in pleasing her master, in being desired and treasured. If she is to be an object, after all, she might as well seek to be a jewel-encrusted object made of precious metals than a cheap and worthless object.

A further issue might be raised: the wife will no doubt work for the master as well, but will be assigned tasks that do not give her sense of her own agency because they do not involve any change, any production, but merely the maintenance of things as they are: the preparation of food, the cleaning of the house, the changing of a baby's nappy. She pours her effort into making the bed: it is slept in, and becomes messy again. So she repeats her work, repeats it every day, and as a result teaches herself not that by her actions she can change and master the world, but that her work is

simply static, something that exists and does not change or end, i.e. an object. This is likely to also come out in the most distinctively female form of 'work', pregnancy and childbirth. By the most extreme exertion and sacrifice, the wife serves not to change the population but to maintain it, not to produce but to reproduce. Even in so far as the detailed forming and education of the growing child is not taken over by male professionals, whatever self-expression she may gain here is still mediated through another, and cannot strengthen her sense of herself specifically as person.

So whereas the servitude of the male slave undermines itself, that of the female slave reinforces itself. Any of the factors that might give the wife a sense of her own personhood – pre-eminent among which is the fact that she is a person – can be counter-acted by the experience of rape. The result is a far more durable and stable form of oppression, the strength of which is indicated by the fact that even Hegel himself, filled with enthusiasm for equality, liberty, and fraternity, writing an account of the delusiveness of male-male enslavement – even he dismissed women from most of his work, and when he comes to consider them, degrades them in the strongest terms.

Certain of these issues have been given prominence in feminist theories. For example, Susan Brownmiller, in "Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape", speaks of the profound significance of rape and sexual subjugation, ranking it "with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe." She writes that "one of the earliest forms of male bonding must have been the gang rape of one woman by a band of marauding men. This accomplished, rape became not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood."

Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of childbearing and the way in which the biological species-preserving work of the female body prevents her from fully participating in the species-transcending work of the human individual, in activities such as writing, building, ruling, which are monopolised by men. Women, she says, "have within them a hostile element – it is the species gnawing at their vitals."

But I do not think that either of these two themes by itself is enough to answer our initial question. For we have dwelt upon the case where a male creature subjugates a female one, and have thus not explained how this basic state, of male domination,

arose. Even observing that women must deal with childbearing still doesn't quite explain why they should be so wholly, so actively, so artificially, excluded even from combining some small measure of politics, literature, or whatever with this. With the right social support women could probably take an equal part in such activities, and certainly so in a modern technological society. Why is it, then, that society has been designed not to empower but to suppress women? Why has there been an active political thrust against women?

To address this, we must consider the situation with more than two creatures – for humans became social creatures long before they became humans. It is unlikely that they will all either enslave each other or be enslaved – rather it is likely that there will be a multitude of individuals who have in whatever way enslaved other individuals. And among these individuals, the original conflict, the sense of each one's sense of personhood being threatened by all the others, can be mitigated. Master 1 meets Master 2: both wish to preserve their sense of themselves as supreme, yet they cannot both be supreme. The solution? Master 1 will be supreme over a certain sphere (slaves 1 to 3) while Master 2 will be supreme over a separate sphere (slaves 4 to 8). This is not perfect – they both still would like to be supreme master if they could. But in order to avoid an uncertain and perilous war, and enjoy their respective private dominions, it may well be the best option.

In a very abstract form, I believe that such an arrangement is the most historically accurate way to interpret the idea of a 'social contract', as described by philosophers such as Locke or Rousseau. The social contract was an agreement between masters, to end the war not altogether, but only after they had already won substantially against the slaves, who were not parties to the contract.

In concrete form such a contract might be the agreement of mutual recognition between the heads of different states; the agreement to the rules of the market by the owners of different companies; the signing of a 'Magna Carta' between barons and the king; or the erection of a grand Athenian 'democracy', in which a minority of the people would explicitly and triumphantly proclaim itself the whole people.

But all these forms, of course, depend on certain contingent and quite complex political and social arrangements. Presidents can make peace only if there is a conflict between states; barons only if there is feudalism, etc. But there is a conflict which exists in all societies, based merely on the biology of reproduction – the struggle between males for access to females. And to end that conflict, there will thus be a contract between men to end their competition for females by allocating to each of them the right of sexual access to different females. Since the consent of these females

is not at issue, and they are not involved in the contract, this is equivalently a contract of systematic rape.

So what had, in less developed species, been a source of collective weakness for the male sex, namely their endemic conflict, becomes for humans a source of collective strength, for it is the fact of conflict which forces men to make peace with each other, to explicitly and publicly establish the rules by which they will regulate their dealings. Women were not constantly attacking each other, and so there was no need to include them in this 'contract'. As a result, men were able to form society and exclude women from it, and to propagate and maintain that exclusion by the objectifying effect of prolonged, systematic sexual abuse. We see the beginnings of this in the more social animal species, among baboons and lions for example, where the first developments of a social order tend to leave males in the top position. Among humans, precisely by virtue of our spectacular sociality, our amazing intelligence and ability to develop and understand ourselves – precisely by virtue of this we have turned the conflict-proneness of males into a political society of males, collectively and collaboratively denying the humanity of women.



