

The Allegory of Mastery: Pragmatic and Semantic Lessons

Bob Brandom

Hegel agrees with Kant that we are both creators and creatures of our *commitments*. What is most fundamental to us, as the essentially normative creatures we are, is our capacity to commit ourselves. This is the authority to undertake responsibilities. It is the authority to make ourselves responsible by taking ourselves to be responsible. In this way, we institute statuses by our attitudes. In the previous lecture I was particularly concerned to highlight how Hegel's *social* recognitive model develops out of Kant's *individual* autonomy model by making explicit what can be seen to be implicit in Kant's invocation of the other-regarding duty to *respect* beings that are autonomous in the sense of having the authority to make themselves responsible, that is, to commit themselves. *Respecting* autonomous others in this sense is the core of Hegel's practical attitude of *recognizing* them. It is *attributing* the authority to institute normative statuses by one's normative attitudes, *making* oneself responsible by *taking* oneself to be responsible. The principal difference is that Hegel sees such recognition as an essential component in *instituting* the distinctive authority in question, not merely as an attitude normatively required as a *consequence* of the antecedently intelligible possession by another of that kind of authority.

Hegel's speculative retrospective rational reconstruction (*Erinnerung*) of the advent of the subordination-obedience structure of recognition takes the form of an allegory. What emerges from the life-and-death struggle is a distinctive constellation of recognitive relations between superior and subordinate, personified as Master and Servant [*Herr und Knecht*]. Each party practically understands himself and the other according to the categories of Mastery. This is a practical normative conception that understands the Master as a locus of *pure independence*, authority without responsibility, and the Servant as a locus of *pure dependence*, responsibility without authority. Hegel thinks a practical recognitive conception embodying this social division of normative role is implicit in any practices exhibiting the traditional asymmetric superior-subordinate structure of normativity.

Hegel argues that this practical recognitive conception is radically defective—and so, accordingly, are the self-conscious normative selves or subjects it shapes. At base, what is wrong with the subordination-obedience model is that it systematically mistakes *power* for *authority*. This is a fundamental mistake about the metaphysics of normativity. But the mistake is not merely theoretical. It is practical, as well. It leads to deformed social institutions and deformed self-conscious individual selves. Those institutions are deformed in fact, not just in their self-understandings. This mistaking of power for authority has a relatively intricate fine-structure, according to Hegel. That is what he is teaching us about with the allegory of Mastery.

One key feature of the life-and-death struggle is precisely that it *is* a matter of life and death. An essential element of the transition from being a living organism, belonging to the realm of Nature, to being a denizen of the realm of Spirit is willingness to risk one's biological life.

“It is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the immediate form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as vanishing moments, that it is only pure being-for-self. The individual who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained to the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.” [*PhG* §187].

I argued in my first lecture that the new element that is introduced here is the idea that in risking one's life one *identifies* with what one risks one's life *for*, rather than identifying oneself with the biological

existence that one risks. By being willing to risk one's life for something, one makes it the case that the life one risks is *not* an *essential* element of the self one is thereby constituting, while that for which one risks it is. What mattered for the transition from Natur to Geist were the cases where what one was willing to risk one's natural life for was a *commitment*, something *normative*: a normative status or attitude. This is risking something *actual* for something *ideal*.

Self-consciousness can be thought of to begin with as consciousness of one's self—a matter of being *for* oneself what one is *in* oneself. In the idiom I have been recommending, this is to have one's normative *statuses* appropriately reflected in one's normative *attitudes*. It is to acknowledge the responsibility and authority one actually has. We might think of this as *theoretical* self-consciousness. The self-constitutive achievement of existential identification makes visible a complementary dimension of *practical* self-consciousness. For in this case, statuses reflect attitudes, rather than the other way around. It is by practically *taking* oneself to be a certain kind of self, identifying with one rather than another element of one's statuses and attitudes, that one *makes* oneself into a different kind of self, alters one's status. What one is *in* oneself is *responsible to* (in Hegel's terms, dependent on) what one is *for* oneself, one's practical attitude of identification. Each of the theoretical and the practical dimensions of self-consciousness yield something that the self is *in and for itself*.

Implicit in desire, by its nature, is a second-order desire: the desire that things should be *in* themselves, just what they are *for* the desirer. That is the desire that one's desires be satisfied, just because they *are* one's desires. To see that such a second-order desire is implicit in what it is to be a (first-order) desire it suffices to reflect that it is as correct to say that all particular *desires* are united in their common aim at *satisfaction* as it is to say that all particular *beliefs* are united in their common aim at *truth*. That ideal of pure independence implicit in desire as such is the orectic origin of the normative self-conception of Mastery. For this implicit ideal is a practical conception of oneself as an *immediately, transparently constitutive taker*. To be a constitutive taker is to be such that *taking* things to have a certain practical significance succeeds in *making* them have that significance.

In the account in my first lecture of the tripartite structure of desire, that structure was epitomized by the relations between hunger, food, and eating: a desire, an activity motivated by that desire, and a practical significance things could have with respect to the desire. The desire then provides a standard of assessment of the success of the activity it motivates, accordingly as the desire is or is not satisfied. For that induces a distinction with respect to the practical significance, between what has that significance *for* the desirer (is treated as food by being eaten) and what *really* has that significance, *in* itself (is in fact food in that it satisfies the hunger that motivated the eating). This orectic structure accordingly makes possible the sort of *experience of error* that the *Introduction* identifies as underlying the representational character of consciousness. This analysis encourages us to inquire into the *activity* that corresponds to the second-order desire that everything be *in* itself just whatever it is *for* the desirer. What stands to *that* desire as eating stands to hunger? I think the answer Hegel offers is that that activity is engaging in a life-and-death struggle with any and every other subject of that same desire. That is struggling to make it be *in* itself what it is *for* the sovereign desirer: an object for whom and in whom only the sovereign desirer's desires are efficacious.

The first phase of Hegel's allegorical story is the life-and-death struggle. Hegel says the result of the struggle is "two opposed shapes of consciousness; one 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 master, the other is servant." [*PhG* §189] The second phase is the normative relationship of subordination and obedience that obtains between the victor and the vanquished in that struggle. This is the relationship between Master and Servant.

The first point to understand in reading this phase of the story, in order to understand the self-conception of Mastery, is that the victor takes it that his victory indicates *success* in satisfying the desire that motivated the struggle in the first place. That second-order desire was the desire that one's desires be immediately and transparently constitutive. It is the desire that one have the power (being transformed, as we will see, into the normative shape of authority) to make things so by taking them to be so. The victor takes it that by *taking* himself to be an immediately and transparently constitutive taker in the way he has, that is by existentially identifying with his claiming that status, and by having come through the life-and-death struggle victorious, he has immediately and transparently *made* himself be such a taker, and so has successfully instituted that status. That is what the master is *for* himself, and he takes his victory to have successfully transformed that status from being the merely *virtual* object of his attitude (the original second-order desire) to being *actualized* as the status that is what he is *in* himself.

Though he is wrong about what he has achieved, the victor in the life-and-death struggle is not *simply* deluded. He *has* substantially transformed himself by staking his life, by existentially identifying with his practical self-conception. In so doing he raised himself above being in himself simply a desiring living being. For he succeeded in making himself *essentially self-conscious*, someone such that what he is *for* himself is an essential component of what he is *in* himself. As such, he is subject to a distinctive new kind of self-development. For changing what he is *for* himself changes what he is *in* himself. As an essentially self-conscious being, he is now an essentially *historical* being. The act of practical self-identification, he performed was *constitutive*. It was a self-taking that was a self-making. In this sense, the master is right to think of himself as a constitutive taker.

In understanding the significance of his victory in terms of Mastery, the victor in the life-and-death struggle has misunderstood what he has actually succeeded in doing. He has overgeneralized his genuine achievement, which was making himself essentially self-conscious in himself by his practical attitude of existentially identifying with what he is for himself. What he successfully made himself be in himself—the status his attitudes instituted—is not all of, but only a part of, what he was for himself. He has immediately instituted a status by adopting an attitude. But that falls far short of the sort of sovereignty he desired his attitudes to have. In misunderstanding his achievement, the master misunderstands himself.

Here is the irony of Mastery: the master has not only made himself essentially self-conscious, he has achieved a genuinely *normative* status—crossing the boundary between the merely living and the genuinely normative. The master-servant relation is a genuinely normative structure of subordination and obedience. And it is so *because* it is what the master denies: a *recognitive* relation, in which (asymmetric) recognitive attitudes are suitably complemented (albeit asymmetrically), so as to institute genuine (if defective) normative statuses. In fact the master is the master only insofar as he is recognized *as* the master by the servant. The servant exercises recognitive authority over the master, who is normatively dependent upon, responsible to, the servant for his status—which is a *normative* status just because and insofar as it is instituted by recognition. But the master does not recognize the recognitive authority of the servant.

What happens to the Master is the metaphysical version of what happens psychologically to someone who aspires to celebrity, acquiring along the way a contempt for the mass of admirers whose acknowledgement constitutes that celebrity. Self-respect is difficult to achieve by regarding oneself as reflected in a mirror of morons. The Master is who he is insofar as he is recognized as Master by those whom the Master is committed to regarding only with contempt. He is no more than they can make him. His low opinion of them is in fact a low opinion of himself.

The institution of self-conscious normative subjects who are for themselves what they are in themselves requires that recognitive authority and recognitive responsibility be co-ordinate and commensurate. It

requires two such normative subjects exercising reciprocal recognitive authority over each other and holding each other recognitively responsible. Asymmetric claims of authority without corresponding responsibility institutes only virtual statuses, statuses actual only as the objects of those attitudes, not genuine normative statuses. And claims of authority unaccompanied by grants of authority to hold one responsible for the exercise of that authority are asymmetric in that sense. A principal symptom of the defect inherent in exercises of Mastery, claims of pure independence, is the structural failure of self-consciousness that consists in what the Master is in himself, his actual normative statuses, being massively divergent from what he is for himself, the virtual statuses that are the objects of his attitudes. And it is not just that what the Master is for gets wrong what he is in himself. Being that *for* himself *deforms* what he is *in* himself, precisely because of what his act of essential identification has made him: an essentially self-conscious self—a self such that what it is for itself is an essential structure defining what he is in himself. This metaphysical irony is the efficacy of fate.

The labor the Servant is obliged to do is the practical version of what showed up for us already in the *Introduction* as the *experience of error*. That process, in which the disparity between what things are for consciousness (appearance) and what they are in themselves (reality) is the motor of change of attitude, was identified there as the locus of the *representational* dimension of conceptual content, the objective purport (their directedness at what things are in themselves) of commitments expressing what things are for consciousness. The experience of error is the normative, conceptually articulated, hence geistig, development of orrectic proto-consciousness. For we saw how the tripartite structure of desire allows that merely natural state not only to institute practical significances (e.g. things treated as food by being responded to by eating) expressing what things are *for* the desiring animal, but to provide standards of correctness and error regarding what things are *in* themselves, accordingly as eating what is taken as food does or does not satisfy the motivating hunger. The distinction between appearance and reality that shows up naturally, concretely, and immediately in that setting is transformed into something normative, abstract, and mediated where the desire that motivates the Servant's activities and assesses the correctness or error of their results is something only the Master *feels*.

We are now in a position to see that there is a *recognitive* version of this sort of experience on the side of *self-consciousness* that exhibits a generic structure of authority and responsibility corresponding to the specific *cognitive* experience of error characteristic of *consciousness*. Mastery's ideology of pure independence corresponds, on the recognitive side of self-consciousness, to a form of cognitive consciousness that takes whatever *seems* right to it to *be* right, and so fails to adopt determinately contentful attitudes.

In recognizing other subjects, that is, in attributing recognitive authority to them, I make myself vulnerable, in the sense that my actual status depends not only on my attitudes, but also on the attitudes of those I recognize. Just so, in representing something, in attributing to it the representational authority constitutive of being represented, I make myself vulnerable to error, in the sense that the correctness of my representing depends not only on how I represent things, but on how it actually is with what only thereby counts as represented. This vulnerability to the other, whether on the side of subjects or of objects, this acknowledging one's responsibility to and the authority of the other, opens up the possibility of *discordance* between one's commitments. On the recognitive side, the discordance is incompatibility between the virtual statuses one acknowledges or claims and those that are attributed by those one recognizes. On the cognitive side, the discordance is between the contents of one's own attitudes.