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 orectic 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.