

Master-Servant notes*

Phenomenology of Spirit, (§ 178 - 196)

**This is a particular process of changing self-conception whereby two consciousnesses transform their self-conception through each other and through their activity. It is a method of understanding self-consciousness.*

Summary

Legend:

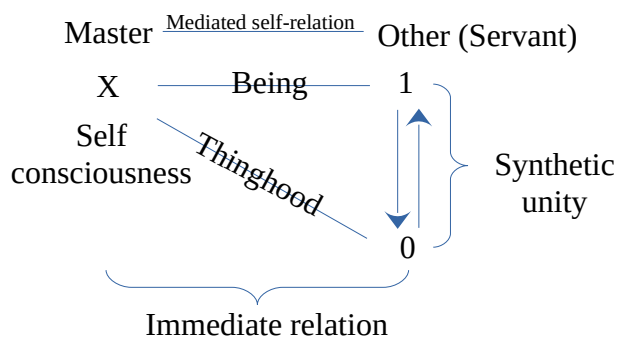
Self-consciousness = X

Indeterminacy, freedom, subjectivity = 1

Determinacy, thingness, objectivity = 0

$$0 < X < 1$$

Life is non-self sufficient, it is not being-for-itself and it cannot be pure self-consciousness. Pure self-consciousness requires life, it cannot exist without it. The master is consciousness existing for itself, mediated through "itself" through another consciousness. This can be expressed by the basic mathematical identity of $X = X$. The master "X" can only exist for itself if it is related to itself through an other.



The master, the concept of self-consciousness, exists for itself and is mediated with itself through an other consciousness. This other is a synthetic unity of its being and its self-sufficient being, or thinghood. This other is the servant, and the servant is only himself relative to the master. The master relates to both of these aspects of the other immediately, as reflections of itself. The master further relates to each mediated through the other: thinghood through self-consciousness and self-consciousness through thinghood.

The master relates to the thing mediated through the servant, which can be represented as X'. Therefore, X relates to X' which relates to 0, or the thing. In other terms, A relates to B which relates to C; it is only through B that A can relate to C. The servant relates himself negatively to the thing, (it is a limiting factor and an aspect of his subordination to the master) and sublates it. At the same time, the thing is self-sufficiency itself for the servant, and so the servant cannot eliminate it, only process it. The master, by relating to the thing mediately through the servant, is able to negate the non-self-sufficient aspect of the thing immediately. The desire of the servant is not enough to negate the thing, as it is self sufficient, but by allowing the servant to process the thing's self-sufficiency, the master can negate the the things non-self-sufficient aspect, i.e. what arrives to him.

The servant perceives his self-consciousness to be inessential in the previous processes: the master relating to himself through the servant and the master negating the thing, mediated through the servant. The servant's self-consciousness is subordinated to processing or working on the thing, and is also dependent on the thing's self-sufficiency and determinacy. The master, as pure being-for-itself is the essential doing in this relationship, while the servant is subordinated, impure, and inessential doing. The servant is not self-existent and does what the master does to it. The self-recognition of the master in the servant is one-sided: the master's doing to the servant is in regard with the other, and thereby in regard to himself. For genuine recognition, the servant should do to the other what he does in regard to himself, but the inessential aspect prevents this.

The one-sided recognition with the inessential consciousness of the servant is what constitutes the truth of the master's certainty in himself. This certainty did not arrive from a pure reflection, since the inessential consciousness is different to the essential consciousness, but from discovering that the object, the inessential consciousness, is not a self-sufficient consciousness; the discovery that the inessential consciousness performs inessential actions, dependent on the master. The truth is not that of pure self-existence or being-for-itself, but of dependent and inessential consciousness. Therefore, the master learns that he is dependent on the servant for 1) self-recognition, 2) mastery over things, and 3) feeling essential or self-sufficient. The essence of self-consciousness is therefore the exact opposite of the master's desire for being-for-itself and for the absolute power over things, and this is discovered through the exercise of that desire. The master's only attachment to authentic being-for-itself is to his own self-conception.

The servant undergoes the process of inversion by realizing that the master, initially interpreted as the essence of self-consciousness, a self-sufficient consciousness existing for itself, or being-for-itself, which is necessary for servitude, but is outside of servitude. Although this self-consciousness is purely negative, (negating every thing) the servant's self-consciousness has experienced this negativity through servitude. The fear of death, for the servant, is the fear of the absolute master. This pure fear, which negates all things and makes fluid existence itself, is absolute negativity and the essence of self-consciousness. Through servitude, he sublates each individual attachment to natural existence and through work ends his natural existence. This is the first constitutive process by which the servant comes to the awareness of objective self-existence.

The servant's experience of sensing absolute power and fearing the master is what begins the process of understanding the nature of self-consciousness. At that point consciousness is not yet aware of its self-existence. It is through the work of servitude, by acting on the thing, which is the object of desire of the master, that the servant comes to realize his self-consciousness. By desiring the object, the master reserved to himself the feeling of 'self', while obligating the servant to provide for that desire, working on the inessential aspect of the thing. However, the master's desire to negate the object is vanishing, while the servant's work persists as restrained desire. The servant's negative relation to the object passes onto the object, becomes permanent, and the object has independence for the servant. This negative relation, a relation which works on the object to shape and form it, is the essence and individual existence of the servant's self-consciousness, which is imprinted and made permanent on the object on which it works. Through servitude and work, by shaping and forming the object, the servant recognizes himself as an independent being.* This is the second constitutive process by which the servant comes to the awareness of objective self-existence.

The servant, by acting on an object, through formative activity, becomes aware of his own self-existence and negativity, but only as an object that sublates (or cancels, transforms) the form (of the object) in front of it. However this negativity was the object of the servant's fear earlier, when the master was perceived as the essence of pure negativity, which was alien to the servant. By realizing that his formative activity also contains this negativity, restrained, is what allows the servant to destroy the alien essence of negativity. In so doing the servant becomes an existing being-for-itself. For the servant, being-for-itself is either alien and belongs to the master, or belongs to himself, the servant. In fear, this alien presentation of being-for-itself is in the servant. In (culturally) formative activity, work, being-for-itself loses its alien presentation and becomes the servant's own being-for-itself, allowing the servant to come to the understanding that he is in and for himself. Work, which appeared as merely imposed by the master's will and for the master's desire, becomes an authentic expression of the servant's creative, or formative, capacity, and he imprints on the object on which he works his own identity.

The fact that in formative activity, the form is posited as external to the servant, means that the servant's being-for-itself, and his truth, is the form, which is no longer an other. Through work, which seemed to be for the sake of another's mind, the servant acquires a mind of his own. The two constitutive processes of the mind-forming process are fear and formative activity, through servitude. Undisciplined fear, without servitude, remains formal, it remains as a particular form and does not spread, formless, throughout conscious reality. Without formative activity to shape fear, it remains "inward and mute" and consciousness does not become consciousness for itself. If the consciousness of the servant engages in formative activity without knowledge of the first, absolute fear, then the mind of its own which it has developed, as its form, or negativity, its not negativity in itself. This formative activity cannot give him the consciousness of himself as consciousness of the essence of being-for-itself, because the negative essence, represented in its absolute form as absolute negativity, will have remained alien to the consciousness. Unless the natural consciousness is shaken in every way, the consciousness will remain attached to his determinate aspect. The pure form cannot be the essence of consciousness, nor can it be universally formative activity. Instead, the form has mastery over certain things, but not over universal power nor the objective essence.

**This may have influenced Marx's interpretation of formative activity as productive and creative activity: humanity's basic nature.*

Summary:

The project is to develop a concept of a process of self-cognition, and this is done by allegory. Suppose two beings come into contact each other, and enter into a struggle to prove each others' self-existence, since self-recognition is only possible through the other. One is subordinated to the other, one being becomes the master and the other, the servant. The master desires to achieve independent consciousness, and takes from the servant what is necessary to achieve freedom and to live without fear of death. To the master it appears that he is self-sufficient, independent, and essential, and it appears that his servant is not-self-sufficient, dependent, and inessential.

The trouble is that the master's appearance of independence and self-sufficiency is an illusion, created by the freedom that is generated by the servant's relation of dependence to the master, and the fact that the master does not interact with nature directly, but processed through the servant. The relation of dependence of the master to the servant is present, but obscured, and when it's uncovered the master loses his sense of independent self-existence.

The servant's notion of self-existence is bound up with his relation to the master, but he comes to realize his own self existence in two ways. First, the servant fears death, which is the ultimate negativity, that is to say death has the power to negate all things; previously the servant associated negativity with the master, and negativity appeared alien. With death, negativity is immediately and completely personal. Second, the servant works on objects in nature for the master, which seems at first to be deeply impersonal: his work is at the whim of the master. But the truth is that work is an expression of the servant's creative or formative activity and capacity, the objects on which he works are left with the imprint of his own conscious activity, and so he realizes his own existence through that work. These two methods: fear and work, are related and inseparable if the servant is to attain a real self-consciousness, or a real mind of his own.