What’s Wrong with the Master?

A Critical Analysis of Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic

In his influential master-slave dialectic, Hegel looks to demonstrate that being a master is self-defeating. The master seeks absolute independence and genuine recognition from another. However, they *depend* upon their slave for their mastery, and the recognition their slave provides is “one-sided and unequal” (PS, §191, p. 114). Thus, Hegel claims that mastery undermines itself. In this paper, I put some pressure on this dialectic. Amongst other things, I argue that what is primarily wrong with the master is the fact they dominate a slave, not that they somehow fail on their own terms.

**Keywords:** Hegel, Master-Slave Dialectic, Immanent Critique, Domination.

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In the Master-Slave Dialectic, Hegel looks to show that mastery is self-defeating. The master seeks absolute independence and genuine recognition from an equal, but they end up depending upon their slave, and receiving “one-sided and unequal” (PS, §191, p. 114) recognition from them. In this paper, I put some pressure on this dialectic.

I begin by providing a brief account of the Master-Slave Dialectic, focussing upon two prominent readings by Stephen Houlgate and Robert Stern. These readings converge, and provide a compelling account of the dialectic. I then turn to offer a critical analysis of this account, advancing four concerns.

The first concern focuses on the claim that the master *depends* upon the slave. I worry that this is only true in a weak sense of ‘depends’. I then develop a suggestion from Franz Fanon to argue that the position of the master is only self-defeating *if* the master happens to want certain things, for instance genuine recognition from an equal. If they don’t want such things, then mastery does not turn out to be self-defeating. Following this, I consider whether a community of masters providing each other with mutual recognition might circumvent Hegel’s dialectic. And finally, I contend that what really matters if that mastery *is wrong*, not that it undermines itself. The first three concerns suggest that the Master-Slave Dialectic delivers a more limited result than is typically thought. The fourth suggests that it delivers the wrong sort of result, and that we should look elsewhere for a non-immanent critique of mastery.

In advancing these charges, I also consider what Hegel could say in response. In doing so, I look to advance discussion of this crucial text.

# The Master-Slave Dialectic

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel wants to show that all positions other than his own fail. In this way, it’s a negative text, looking to clear the ground so Hegel can introduce his own system,[[1]](#footnote-1) which he does in his *Encylopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (and elsewhere[[2]](#footnote-2)). Hegel does not want to be dogmatic though, and thus in the *Phenomenology*, he proceeds via immanent critique,[[3]](#footnote-3) attempting to show that all positions other than his own fail *on their own terms*.[[4]](#footnote-4)

With the Master-Slave dialectic, Hegel will look to show (among other things) that mastery fails on its own terms. Hence Beiser’s claim that, with this dialectic:

Hegel proves the wisdom behind Rousseau’s famous lines: ‘He who believes himself a master of others is more a slave than they.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The entire dialectic […] is really only an elaborate defense of Rousseau’s dictum. (Beiser 2005: 190)

In the dialectic, we find Hegel exploring certain underdeveloped stages of self-consciousness. They are looking for satisfaction in the world, in the form of self-certainty, or absolute independence, or being recognised as a free being.[[6]](#footnote-6) One initial attempt to achieve this involves (for complicated reasons) a life and death struggle with another self-consciousness.[[7]](#footnote-7) Through this, one lives and the other dies. The surviving self-consciousness might look like they have emerged the victor, but neither of them has recognition as a free being. The victor has killed the other self-consciousness, and thus there is no one there to recognise them, where the slain is dead and so can also not be recognised.

This dialectic, a life and death struggle to achieve recognition as free beings, thus undermines itself. It also takes us to the next dialectic.[[8]](#footnote-8) Instead of fighting to the death, one self-consciousness, afraid of death, surrenders, and submits to the will of the other. And so, instead of the struggle for recognition ending up with a victor and a dead body, we now end up with a master and a slave.

Once more, it might look like the master has got what they were after. They get recognized as a free being by their slave. Their slave also does their bidding for them, going to work on the world in their stead.

However, things are not quite that straightforward. At this point, it will help to delve into the text. Here is what Hegel says:

[…] a form of recognition has arisen that is one-sided and unequal. (PS, §191, p. 114)

[…] the object in which the master has achieved his mastery has become, to the master, something entirely different from a self-sufficient consciousness. (PS, §192, p. 114)

The basic thought here seems to be that, while the master does get some recognition, they get this recognition from their slave, and thus it is not genuine, but instead one-sided and unequal.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Hegel continues to note that:

The *truth* of the self-sufficient consciousness is thus the *servile consciousness.* […] in the way that mastery showed that its essence is the inversion of what mastery wants to be, so too in its consummation will servitude become instead the opposite of what it immediately is. (PS, §193, p. 114)

The truth of the slave is important, both in the master-slave dialectic, and for the progression of the *Phenomenology*.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, I would like to leave it aside in this paper to focus on the master.[[11]](#footnote-11) Returning to the master, in this passage, we see Hegel note that “mastery showed that its essence is the inversion of what mastery wants to be” (PS, §193, p. 114).

So what has happened here? I’m not entirely clear. The Master-Slave Dialectic is one of the most influential and generative texts in the history of philosophy. It’s dense, difficult, rewards re-reading, and has inspired numerous interesting interpretations. And I see this as a strength of the text.[[12]](#footnote-12) People have read the dialectic as an argument that dominating others is self-defeating,[[13]](#footnote-13)or that seeking absolute independence is self-defeating,[[14]](#footnote-14) or that solipsism is self-defeating,[[15]](#footnote-15) or that immediate self-consciousness is self-defeating, and there are other heterodox readings too.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In this paper, I do not seek to adjudicate between these readings. Instead, I will share two prominent accounts of the dialectic, which converge on reading it as a lesson in seeking wholly independent freedom. The first is from Stephen Houlgate:

The dialectic besetting the master is easily grasped [!] […] Mastery takes itself to be unlimited, unfettered, wholly independent freedom. Yet it is mediated by the work of the slave, who prepares things for the master’s consumption, and by the recognition that the slave accords the master. Furthermore, mastery depends for its very existence as mastery on the subservience of the slave: for one cannot exercise power and dominance, if there is no one to dominate. The very presence of the slave is thus a constant reminder to the master of the dependent character of mastery itself. (Houlgate 2013: 97):

According to Houlgate, the master looks to be wholly independent, but they *depend* on the slave in various ways.

Robert Stern puts forward a similar position, but with more emphasis on the freedom of others:

I see it as trying to undermine views of freedom, which would take the existence of others as incompatible with that freedom. (Stern 2012: 357)

The thought is that this will allow Hegel to later put forward his own conception of freedom, where:[[17]](#footnote-17)

I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free. (PM: §431z)

This is where Hegel ultimately wants to end up. How then does the Master-Slave Dialectic undermine other views of freedom? Stern contends that:

[…] the master assumes that it has achieved more independence than the slave, because the slave must acknowledge it and do its bidding, without the master having to give anything in return; but here it is led to see that it remains dependent on the slave in its interactions with the material world, while it realises that what the slave gives it in recognition is of little value, so it is here exercising a control that is worthless to it. (Stern 2012: 357-8)

From these two accounts, we can draw out the following.

Mastery undermines itself, for two main reasons. Firstly, mastery *depends* upon servitude. And secondly, mastery results in a form of recognition that is one-sided and unequal. How are these *self*-defeating? The first will be self-defeating, if the master was looking for complete independence; they do not achieve that, because they depend upon their slave. The second will be self-defeating if the master was looking for mutual recognition from an equal;[[18]](#footnote-18) they do not achieve that, because they only get recognition from a subordinate, their slave.

This result has struck many as important. Neuhouser (2009: 49) refers to the Master-Slave Dialectic as “the most influential section of the *Phenomenology*, perhaps of Hegel’s entire corpus”. And Houlgate notes that:[[19]](#footnote-19)

Hegel’s account of mastery and servitude is deservedly famous and influential. It shows with penetrating insight that both mastery and servitude are inherently dialectical: the master is less free than he initially thinks because he is dependent on servitude for his very mastery. (Houlgate 2013: 101-2)

Having laid out a plausible and prominent account of the Master-Slave Dialectic, I want to turn to critically analyse it, and in particular the thought that mastery undermines itself.

# Concern 1: It Depends

Earlier, we saw Houlgate argue that:

[…] mastery depends for its very existence as mastery on the subservience of the slave: for one cannot exercise power and dominance, if there is no one to dominate. The very presence of the slave is thus a constant reminder to the master of the dependent character of mastery itself. (Houlgate 2013: 97)

I agree that mastery depends upon servitude, but worry that there might be an ambiguity in the term ‘depends’ here.

I think a similar ambiguity can show up in the term ‘vulnerability’, which might help draw out this point. A healthy relationship requires vulnerability. But there are two senses of ‘vulnerability’ here. Imagine someone says: “I am vulnerable to my wife; she knows where I keep my passport, and could steal it at anytime!” There is a sense of ‘vulnerability’ here, but it is not the appropriate sense. The appropriate sense also involves being open with another, and sharing one’s hopes, fears, and so on.

Likewise, I think there is an ambiguity in ‘depends’. A healthy relationship also involves some dependence. But there are two senses of ‘depends’ here. One is a thin sense, which is true of any relationship. There is a further substantial sense of ‘depends’ though, where we trust, support, and rely upon each other.

Returning to the Master-Slave Dialectic then, when Houlgate (2013: 97) claims that “mastery depends for its very existence as mastery on the subservience of the slave”, I agree, but worry that this is only true in a very weak sense. Consider a couple of examples. Imagine someone who regularly walks past my house, and throws litter in my garden, with little to no concern for me. If I were to respond, “ah, but you depend upon me for that!”, that seems like an unsatisfying response. Similarly, imagine someone who kicks my bike every time they walk past it. “Ah, but you depend upon me for that” doesn’t really say very much; after all, it’s such a weak sense of dependence, one that is true of any relationship/interaction.

My worry is that the master could say something along the following lines: “Sure, I depend upon the slave in this very weak/minimal sense of depends, but not in any substantial sense.” And if that’s the case, then the fact that “mastery depends for its very existence as mastery on the subservience of the slave” is perhaps not so significant a result.

My concern is that the seemingly impressive result of the Master-Slave Dialectic thus slightly trades upon the connotations of the term ‘depend’. If I can depend upon you, that means something in a substantial sense. But when we speak of a master depending upon their slave for their mastery, this is a very weak sense of ‘depend’. It might sound like an impressive result – masters depend upon their slaves! – but perhaps this just involves exploiting an ambiguity in the term depend.

What might Hegel, Stern or Houlgate say in response to this worry? I think there is a plausible reply available to them. They could reply that the master does depend upon the slave in a more substantial sense. For the master depends upon the slave’s *work* and interaction with the material world.[[20]](#footnote-20) And this showed in both Stern and Houlgate’s accounts of what was self-defeating about mastery:

[…] it is mediated by the work of the slave, who prepares things for the master’s consumption (Houlgate 2013: 97)

[…] it is led to see that it remains dependent on the slave in its interactions with the material world (Stern 2012: 358)

This seems like the master does depend upon the slave in some substantial sense. The master depends upon their slave for their work, and the slave mediates their interactions with the material world. And that seems more than the minimal sense of ‘depends’ that I outlined above; it’s more than just kicking someone’s bike tyre, they rely upon the slave, who materially supports them.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In the end then, it seems like the master depends upon the slave in two senses: 1) in a weak sense in order to be a master (but that is basically true of any relationship); and 2) in a more substantial sense, where they depend upon the slave for their work. But I think the master can be okay with both of these dependences.

This leads into the next section, where we’ll consider what the master wants, and whether this alters the dialectic.

# Concern 2: What the Master Wants

The basic concern in this section is that the Master-Slave Dialectic only works *if* the master wants the right thing in the first place. To take a simple example: If the master wants mutual recognition from a free equal, then Hegel is right that they cannot get that from their slave. But what if they don’t want that?

Fanon makes such a suggestion in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described

by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness

of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. (Fanon 1952: 173n8)

The master Fanon has in mind, does not want mutual recognition from their slave. Instead, they want their slaves’ work, and are happy to laugh at them.

Likewise, as we saw in the previous section, if the master wants *absolute independence* from their slave, they cannot achieve that. But again, what if they don’t want that? What if they want minimal dependence and dominance? If that’s what they want, then perhaps being a master is a very good way to achieve this.

As Thakkar notes:

A situation of this kind does not seem intolerable from a psychological perspective, and the benefits of dominion for an individual or class may well outweigh the costs, especially if they can find ways of maintaining their power while minimizing their interactions with the exploited and oppressed. (Thakkar 2024: 522)

Allen Wood sees the issue here, and pushes it hard:

Hegel’s argument does not show […] that there cannot be good reasons for wanting to dominate others, exploit them, reduce them to a condition of servitude. Dominion promotes the master’s freedom (in the ordinary sense), since it adds to his capacities and removes obstacles to satisfying his desires. Hegel’s argument gives me no reason for respecting the rights of others if I happen to prefer freedom in the ordinary sense to […] the Hegelian sense. (Wood 1990: 92)

If someone just wants to dominate others, then perhaps the Master-Slave Dialectic does not apply to them.

Where does this leave Hegel? One response might be to contextualise the Master-Slave Dialectic in the progression of the *Phenomenology* and Hegel’s philosophy more broadly. After all, despite certain readings, the *Phenomenology* does not end with the Master-Slave Dialectic. And when it occurs, we are still yet to turn to ethical life. Perhaps it’s thereby unfair to expect it to accomplish so much. Instead of revealing what’s morally or ethically wrong with mastery, it just shows how a certain underdeveloped form of self-consciousness is self-undermining.

There’s some truth to this. But it’s also a little unsatisfying. After all, part of the appeal of the Master-Slave Dialectic is that it seems to show that mastery is self-undermining. The hope is, as we saw, that is vindicate Rousseau’s thought that ‘He who believes himself a master of others is more a slave than they.’ If instead all it shows is that a specific form of mastery at an early point in the *Phenomenology* fails, that’s less impressive. And indeed, if Stern and Houlgate are right, Hegel does want to show that looking to dominate others of seek absolute independence are self-defeating.

Otherwise expressed, one could defend Hegel by limiting the scope and the result of the Master-Slave Dialectic. One could claim that it only shows a certain specific form of mastery fails. But then that leaves open the important question of what we are to make of the various forms of mastery and domination that we experience and face in the world. What can Hegel say to these masters, especially if they seem to want domination and power?

Wood has a response:[[22]](#footnote-22)

What Hegel can say instead is that what I want in this case […] is based on an inadequate conception of myself as a human being. (Wood 1990: 92)

I think this is an intriguing response, and want to return to consider it in more depth in the final section of this paper. In doing so, I will explore this thought that in wanting to dominate others, we have an *inadequate* conception of ourselves as human beings. But before we turn to that, let’s continue to the next concern.

# Concern 3: A Community of Masters

It will help to begin our discussion of this with a passage from Wood:

Consistently with Hegel’s argument, I might find self-certainty in the parochial society constituted by a privileged race, caste, or class, whose members mutually recognize one another as persons but treat outsiders as nonpersons. Hegel’s argument proves that I could not achieve self-certainty through my relations with these nonpersons; but if I have already achieved it through membership in my privileged group, I will have nothing to lose and perhaps much to gain from ignoring the supposed rights of those who do not belong to it. (Wood 1990: 93)

The thought here is relatively simple. There could be more than one master (and more than one slave). The masters could then all receive mutual recognition from other masters, while still having slaves.[[23]](#footnote-23)

We can bring this point out through considering Brandom’s recent account of what is wrong with the master:

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 attitudes of acknowledgment institute and constitute 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 a 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. (Brandom 2019: 342)

This is an appealing story, where the contemptuous attitude of the aspiring celebrity come back to bite them. But Wood’s worry seems relevant here. What if the celebrity finds another celebrity, someone with whom they can scorn the masses together? They would still be contemptuous and problematic, but they would have mutual recognition from an equal.

This does not seem too far-fetched, especially of the world we live in, and some of the turns it is taking. As Wood recognises, unfortunately:[[24]](#footnote-24)

[…] people prove to be very ingenious in discovering (or inventing) differences on which to base the exclusion of others from rights which they recognize for themselves and their own kind. (Wood 1990: 93)

This is sad, but true. One of the many flaws of us human beings is out tendency towards in-group loyalty and the propensity to demonise out-groups.

The worry in this section is that one could receive mutual recognition from other masters, while still having slaves. What could Hegel say in response to this? One response might be that these masters wouldn’t be *absolute* masters, for two reasons: 1) they still depend upon their slaves for their mastery; and 2) they do not have absolute independence from all others, as they have equals. I think these are plausible responses. But again, they limit the result of the Master-Slave Dialectic. The result is now that seeking absolute independence *from everyone*, or domination over *all others* are self-defeating. This does not show that other problematic forms of mastery are self-defeating. A world where there were two masters that recognised each other, but dominated the rest of the world would no longer be self-defeating.

At the end of the previous section, I proposed that mastery undermines itself for two reasons. The first was that, *if* the master is seeking *absolute* independence from all others, they do not achieve that, because they depend upon their slave. In the scenario we are now considering, the masters do not achieve this *absolute* independence. Nevertheless, they still remain masters, and still dominate their slaves. This will only be self-defeating if they seek *complete* independence, and there is no reason to think that everyone who looks to dominate others seeks that.

The second way that mastery was self-defeating was if the master was looking for mutual recognition from an equal. And that holds up. If the master wants genuine recognition from an equal, then they will not achieve this through dominating a slave. However: 1) the master might not want this; 2) and they also might be able to get it elsewhere. These are Wood’s two limitations. They point to a general truth, that one only gets out what one puts in. If one pulls a rabbit out of a seemingly empty hat, the rabbit was hiding in there somewhere. With Hegel, the worry is that the Master-Slave Dialectic only really works if the master was already committed to something worthwhile, namely seeking genuine recognition from an equal. But not all those who seek to dominate others are looking for that.

Thakkar considers a version of this objection, and proposes a solution:

The master may well be able to attain sufficient esteem and security from a peer group, but (my) Hegel is not making a psychological claim to the effect that in such circum-stances the master will lack self-esteem or feel danger in the presence of the slave. The thought is rather an epistemic and metaphysical one: in the absence of mutual recognition, the master will not be able to *know* himself as an authority vis-à-vis the slave because he will not be able to be an authority vis-à-vis the slave. The real question is whether that claim is true, and, if so, why it should matter. (Thakkar 2024: 521)

What is the solution?

[…] the Hegelian must point out that […] there is at least one type of authority relation that does require reciprocal recognition, and then insist that we have reason to value this kind of relation. (Thakkar 2024: 522)

I agree! But this takes us away from focussing on how mastery is self-defeating, and moves us to the thought that mastery is wrong. Let’s turn to this now.

# Concern 4: Mastery is Wrong

What can we say about masters who do not seek absolute independence, or mutual recognition from their slave(s)? Here, I want to put forward my main claim: *mastery is wrong*. Dominating others is bad. That is what matters, not whether mastery undermines itself, or fails to achieve genuine recognition.

By itself, this claim might look a little flat-footed. In what follows, I want to consider a variety of possible responses. In doing so, the virtues of my approach – denouncing mastery as wrong – will hopefully become apparent.

The first response is that saying mastery is wrong is *dogmatic*. And that’s a problem in, especially because Hegel wants to avoid dogmatism. As Houlgate (2013: 6) notes, Hegel claims that “one bare assurance is worth just as much as another” (PS, §76, p.49). But I’m not sure that’s true. For one, I am okay with being firm – or dogmatic, if you insist – in this case. If I am sure of anything, it’s that dominating others, or having slaves is wrong.

At some point, I suspect we just hit ethical bedrock. Needless cruelty is wrong. There is not much more one needs to say here.[[25]](#footnote-25) And any attempt to justify this with reference to something else, especially something non-moral, will lose a grip on the key point, namely the moral wrongness of needless cruelty.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The second response is that saying mastery is wrong doesn’t *explain* why being a master is wrong, whereas Hegel, in the Master-Slave Dialectic does. However, it is not clear that Hegel does explain why mastery is wrong. He shows how it might be self-defeating, but not *why it is wrong*. And I can say something to explain this. Domination, for instance, fails to respect others as rational agents. If we wanted more explanation, we could invoke Kant here, and the formula of humanity. We ought to:

*“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or anyone else’s, never merely as a means, but also always as an end.”* (IV: 429) Mastery fails to do this, and that’s why it’s wrong. Of course, someone might object that this explanation is dogmatic, but why should we be troubled about being firm in our conviction that we ought to respect others’ agency?

The third response involves a tweak to the second. The thought is that saying mastery is wrong does not explain *to the master* why being a master is wrong.[[27]](#footnote-27) I might be able to say something about why mastery is wrong, but I cannot explain this to the master, where Hegel, proceeding through immanent critique can. But again, I think this is not quite right. Hegel does not explain to the master *why they are wrong*; at the most he might be able to show them how they are self-defeating.

In general, we should be careful about providing non-moral reasons to be moral.[[28]](#footnote-28) Actual slavery was wrong because it failed to respect human beings, not because it wasn’t the most profitable economic system available. Of course, the fact that it wasn’t the most profitable economic system might have been an easier way to appeal to slave-owners, but we should be careful about providing these kinds of reasons. For one, they frame the thing that matters as the non-moral concern (maximising profit) rather than the crucial moral concern.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The appropriate explanation of why we should abolish slavery is the wrongness of slavery. And again, we can say something about that to slave-owners, whether or not they listen.

One final response runs as follows: In saying that being a master is wrong, I might be overlooking how normativity works on Hegel’s account. What is Hegel’s theory of normativity? Of course, that is complicated and contested.[[30]](#footnote-30) But here is one school of thought, put forward by Stern (2016, 2017) and Alznauer (2016), where norms are grounded in ontology.

“[…] normative evaluation is primarily a matter of a thing’s answerability to its own constitutive norms […] normativity is rooted in ontology.” Alzanauer (2016: 197)

“[…] evaluative claims are based on comparisons between objects as they actually are and the kinds or types of objects they belong to, where the latter brings with it normative implications.” (Stern 2016: 197-8)

“Perfectionism […] involves a picture of the proper development of our capacities as the kinds of creatures we are, and it builds normativity out of that”. Stern (2017: 92)

Their thought is that norms emerge from how well we exemplify the kind of thing that we are. And given this, to just insist that the master is wrong is out of step with Hegel’s theory of normativity. In order to normatively judge the master, we would have to show how they fail to be thing that they are.

This returns us to Wood’s remark that:

“What Hegel can say instead is that what I want in this case […] is based on an inadequate conception of myself as a human being. (Wood 1990: 92)

This aligns with Stern and Alznauer’s accounts of normativity in Hegel. We cannot just say that the master is wrong, but instead should show how the master has an inadequate conception of themselves as a human being.

What can I say in response here? I worry that these accounts of normativity have problems of their own, on precisely the issue that I am pushing.[[31]](#footnote-31) And I think we can see this through looking a little closer at Wood’s claim. Wood claims that wanting to dominate others “is based on an inadequate conception of myself as a human being”. But what is the nature of this inadequacy? In particular, is it metaphysical or moral?

If we think the inadequacy is metaphysical, we will say that desiring to dominate others is based on an inadequate conception of the type of being you are. In dominating others, you are a poor instance of a human (or agent, or rational being, etc.). Nevertheless, while being a deficient human, you might be a good instance of a human\* (or a bully, for example), a being that is otherwise human, apart from their tendency to dominate others. And the key issue is what reason is there to be a human over a human\*? (or a bully) If we think that all normativity comes emerges from the kind of being that you are, then we cannot provide reasons to be a human over a human\* (or a bully).

On the other hand, if we think that the inadequacy is moral, then this problem disappears. For here, we can say that desiring to dominate others is based on an inadequate conception of the type of being *you ought to be*. So, once more, in dominating others, you are a poor instance of a human, but a good instance of a human\* (a bully). However, this is not a problem, because there are moral reasons to be a human over a human\* (or a bully).[[32]](#footnote-32) Dominating others is wrong, and so what the master wants is wrong.

The challenge at hand is that my account of what’s wrong with the master might not fit with Hegel’s account of normativity. I accept that there is something to this challenge, but think that the problem might lie with Hegel’s account of normativity. If we think that wrongness is a matter of a thing failing to exemplify its kind (or its constitutive norms), then we will have little to say about why one ought to be a human over a human\* (or a bully).

In his discussion of Kant’s formula of universal law, Hegel says the following:

It is not [...] because I find something is not self-contradictory that it is right; on the contrary, it is right because it is what is right (PS: §437, 262).

I want to say something similar about mastery. Being a master is not wrong because it is self-contradictory or self-undermining. Being a master is wrong because it is what is wrong.

Where does this leave us then? Well, I think the Master-Slave Dialectic still delivers a result, but a more limited one.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Nevertheless, there is some truth to what Hegel is getting at. There is something bad about mastery for the master. They’re prevented from fully realising themselves. For they are human, and to be human is to be vulnerable and dependent in a substantial sense – we need and rely upon each other. And the master misses out on this, both inter- and intra-personally.

Perhaps we can bring this out by looking another attempt to make a similar point. In book IX of the *Republic*, in his own way, Plato argues that being a master is bad for the master.[[34]](#footnote-34) He writes:

[…] someone with a tyrannical nature lives his whole life without being friends with anyone, always a master to one man or a slave to another and never getting a taste of either freedom or true friendship. (576a)

There is some truth to this, as there is something missing from the life of a tyrant here. And most of us do want freedom and true friendship. But I’m not convinced that tyranny is always self-defeating, as this will depend upon: whether the tyrant wants true friendship (concern 2), and whether they can get it elsewhere, from other tyrants (concern 3).

Plato also asks the following:

[…] mustn’t his soul be full of slavery and unfreedom, with the most decent parts enslaved and with a small part, the maddest and most vicious, as their master? (577d)

Again, I think there is some truth to this. But I’m still not convinced that tyranny or mastery is self-defeating, as that will depend upon what the master wants.

In the end then, what is wrong with the master? Well, I agree with Hegel and Plato that:

* They don’t achieve *absolute* independence
* They don’t achieve mutual recognition (with everyone)
* They miss out on healthy relationships (with everyone)

And these are serious deficiencies. But they might not want these things. In the end, what’s wrong with the master is that they fail morally.

# Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked to put some pressure on Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic. I have argued that there are some important limitations with its result. I have also suggested that it overlooks the wrongness of mastery. What is wrong with the master is that they dominate a slave, not that they somehow fail on their own terms. In making this case, I hope to further discussions on this fascinating and formative text, but also to put some general pressure on Hegel’s methodology and theory of normativity.

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1. See Stern (2013: 25) and Houlgate (2013: 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In the *Philosophy of Right for* instance, we get a full working out of how Hegel’s conception of freedom is to be realised. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Procyshyn (2022) for a helpful attempt to pull apart several different forms that immanent critique can take. For recent defences of forms of immanent critique, see Diehl (2022) and Stahl (2021). And for critical discussion, see Fraser (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Stern (2013: 49-50) and Houlgate (2013: 7-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Tel se croit le maître des autres, qui ne laisse pas d’être plus esclave qu’eux” (Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social, Ou Principes du Droit Politique*, Book 1, Chapter 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for instance, PS, §175-78, p. 109-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. PS, §185-89, p. 112-15. See Houlgate (2013: 93-95) and Stern (2013: 89-97). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. PS, §189, p. 115. See Houlgate (2013: 95) and Stern (2013: 98) for accounts of this transition. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Thakkar (2024: 521-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Through the slave, we learn the importance of work and the fear of death. These go on to lead to Stoicism (PS, §197-99, p. 119-22.). Again, see Houlgate (2013: 102-7) and Stern (2013: 100-3) for accounts of this transition. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Of course, a full understanding of what is wrong with the master would involve some discussion of what is right about the slave, but the slave is not my focus in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Stern (2013: 90) notes that “unfortunately” the text is subject to multiple interpretations. I think this ends up being a virtue of the text. Here I side with Richard Velkley, who makes a similar point about Dieter Henrich’s work on Kant (1994: 10): “The most central passages of a philosopher’s thought, Henrich avers, are necessarily the most difficult and resistant to interpretation. They are also the passages that the most fertile soil for future philosophical developments.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Wood (1990: 86-93). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Stern (2012: 357-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Beiser (2005: 185-191), Norman (1981), Solomon (1983), and Rauch & Sherman (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. McDowell (2009: 147-165), for instance, offers a reading of the Master-Slave Dialectic, where it all occurs within one self-consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. There is another connection to Rousseau worth noting here. Neuhouser (2009: 46) contends that Hegel’s conception of freedom “has its source in Rousseau’s account of how having a general will makes us free”, in that “once a subject begins to think of itself as part of a we, then in depending on the others that also constitute that “we,” that subject depends only on itself (on a collective subject it identifies with).” [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Neuhouser (2009: 49) points out that “*reciprocal* recognition need not be *equal*”, and this seems right. That being said, Hegel does seem clear that there is something deficient about the recognition the master receives from their slave; as we saw earlier, he writes that “a form of recognition has arisen that is one-sided and unequal.” (PS, §191, p. 114) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Houlgate (2013: 102) continues to note the influence of this: “It would be wrong to say that Hegel’s account of the master-slave relation spawned Marxism and Existentialism by itself, but by drawing attention to the liberating role of both labour and the awareness of death in the experience of the slave, it clearly prefigures some of their most distinctive insights.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See PS, §190; 195, pp. 115-16; 117-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Perhaps a modal understanding of dependence might put pressure back on Houlgate and Stern here. After all, to really depend upon the slave might entail that, *if* the slave didn’t work for the master, then the master would wither away. And maybe that isn’t true. For the Master might find other ways to remain fit and healthy. Perhaps the Master *could* work and engage with the material world, they just prefer to rely upon their slave to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See also Silva (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Fanon (1952: 171-3) for a discussion of a community of masters. See also Thakkar (2024: 521-22). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wood (1990: 93) notes that: “Some of Hegel’s own remarks – about women (PR § 166A), or African peoples (VPG 120-129/91-102), or societies not organized as European nation states are (PR § 331R) – could, without a forced interpretation, be used in precisely this way.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. Kauppinen (2002: 494) and Stahl (2022: 7-9), who discuss McDowell in this non-foundationalist context. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Fraser (2023), who notes that an appeal to moral realism helps overcome some of the problems that accompany commitment to immanent critique. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See, for instance, Thakkar (2024: 514): “We want to know whether our commitments and claims are justified, especially in the face of people who do not share them.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Prichard (1912) for the classic statement of this point. See also Stern (2015: 157-70) for a recent discussion of whether this concern applies to Hegel. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cf. Diehl (2022: 682), who makes a similar point in a slightly different context. See also Kauppinen (2002: 488-90) for discussion of how moral concerns and concerns related to recognition can come apart. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Pippin (2008) and Brandom (2009) for alternative accounts to Stern and Alznauer’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Saunders (2019) for an attempt to articulate these problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Recall Thakkar’s (2024: 522) claim that: “[…] the Hegelian must point out that […] there is at least one type of authority relation that does require reciprocal recognition, and then insist that we have reason to value this kind of relation”. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cf. Thakkar (2024: 522) who offers an alternative account of a modest result of the Master-Slave Dialectic. Thakkar notes that: “There is therefore a kind of internal pressure within ethical life to settle on arrangements that embed mutual recognition at the level of fundamental rights, entitlements to jus-tice and claims to authority. This does not mean that arrangements that embed basic hierarchies cannot exist for a very long time, or that the direction of historical travel will always be one way. But for the modest Hegelian the point of invoking mutual recognition is not explanation, but vindication: in pointing to the value of social arrangements that grant rights reciprocally, it allows us to see why the Hegelian claim about the social actuality in liberal modernity of a commitment to basic equality is not simply relativistic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For discussion, see Johnstone (2015) and Nielsen (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)