

Conflict and Self-Formation

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In this response, I hope to show that an emphasis on conflict, while certainly important, is only part of the self-formative process. In doing this I want to draw on G.W.F. Hegel's discussion of lordship and bondage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹ But first, let us look at some general aspects of selfhood. I want to think of a self as a subjectivity that has become aware of its own capacity for desire and its own ability for action. It is not just organized behavior motivated by a goal — that description would apply to amoebas and monkeys as well as to human babies. Rather, a self, as I want to use the term, is organized, goal-seeking behavior become aware of itself. In other words, "self" and "self-consciousness" entail one another. A self is a subject aware of its own subjectivity. The development of this awareness is what occurs as subjects become selves.

Hegel was perhaps the first philosopher to express the view that conflict is critical to the formation of selfhood. In the section on "Lordship and Bondage" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel posits selfhood as emerging out of a struggle to the death of two subjectivities, each holding itself as a being in and for itself, while viewing the other as a thing only — something that exists only for it. What Hegel is trying to explain in this wonderfully convoluted but magnificent section is the emergence of self-consciousness or, as I think Todd would say, a subject. For Hegel, though conflict is critical, it has only a mediating role — it is, as Hegel puts it, "the beginning of wisdom," but it is only the beginning. It requires reflection and insight, and new levels of connection. When the section on "Lordship and Bondage" ends, we are presented with a consciousness that understands itself as a being in and for itself — in other words, as a being whose essence is freedom. One may interpret Hegel's formulation as referring to two cultures, two nations, or two individuals. It may be two selves in a marriage as one seeks to form the other to its will, or it might be seen as the relation of a parent to a child. In any case, the clash of wills results in the domination of the one by the other.

At least at the beginning of the process, after one self has subdued the other, only one of these selves has its subjectivity realized. The subdued self is thus brought into line with the other and is forced to grant it, but not itself, recognition as a being in and for itself. It now exists as a being in and for another. One is free; the other is not. This movement is temporary for two reasons: First, the seemingly free being begins to understand that recognition by the other is recognition by an inferior and hence not worth much. As Grouch Marx once quipped, I would not care to join a club that would accept me as a member. And second, while the subdued self initially understands itself as a being that exists completely to serve another, through fear and labor the bondsman comes to understand himself as a self that exists in its own right. Fear brings the bondsman to the realization that at least in this one emotion he is a being for himself. He does not fear for the master, but rather fears the master for

himself. This insight, as inchoate as it may be, is the first glimmer for the bondsman that he is essentially (if not yet actually) a being for himself.

The bondsman's labor completes this insight as it dawns on him that the master is the dependent being and he, as the creator and shaper of a world of things is, again essentially, the independent one — the one who exists in himself. Of course, all of this is at the abstract level of logic and thought for Hegel, and the experiencing of one's self as a really free being takes the entire *Phenomenology* to describe. However, through the self-consciousness produced by fear, labor, and conflict, a self begins to emerge.

For Hegel, though this is only the beginning of the journey — the moment when subjectivity becomes conscious of itself but only abstractly. While understanding himself as essentially free, the bondsman also comes to understand that in actuality — in the world as it is at this moment — he exists as a being only in and for the master. As the slave toils, he understands his toil to be not for himself, as it really should be, but for the other who is seen mistakenly as the only free being here and now. Fear brings the slave to the understanding that his identity with the master is not total. He comes to understand that he does not fear *for* the master, but he fears the master *for himself*.

In the process, there is a reversal as the slave comes to gain understanding of the implications of his own labor and begins thereby to understand both his own independence as a world-forming being and the master's dependence on his labor. In this process a self emerges, but the self that emerges does so because, through this process of independence, dependence, and ultimately interdependence, the slave recognizes his own selfhood as he comes to see himself as an essentially free being — a recognition of sorts of himself as a being that exists in and for himself. In other words, the bondsman can then set himself on the task of realizing his essential freedom.

I mention Hegel not only because there is some affinity to Todd, but also because of the way in which he understands conflict. Conflict is certainly an element in the formation of subjectivity — it is the barrier through which we come both to realize the boundaries of and to define the self.

This very sketchy account of some of the five or six most dense pages in philosophy will not satisfy Hegel scholars, but it should be sufficient to help us see just how conflict might be critical to the formation of the self. Of course, we are not bondsmen. But Hegel and Todd speak to the moment at which insight emerges out of dependency, where that insight brings us to understand our own potential as essentially free beings.

Yet I believe that there is something in Hegel's analysis that is not present in Todd's account and may serve to complete it. Todd's argument can be read as presupposing a duality of sorts: Either democracy and pluralism rest on recognition and dialogue, or they rest on conflict and contestation. Since democracy cannot rest on recognition and dialogue, it must rest on conflict and contestation. Why this stark dualism? Why can it not rest on *both* contestation *and* recognition? Recall that the

struggle between master and bondsman was a struggle *for* recognition, and while we must read a lot more of Hegel to get to the final page, the ultimate outcome is mutual recognition, where both are recognized by the other and come to recognize themselves as essentially free beings.

So what then is the reason to highlight the element of conflict in this process while subordinating the element of mutual recognition and dialogue, as Todd seems to do? My sense is that Todd is rightly concerned about a self that is completely submerged in the other: the wife who lives for her husband's career; the peasant who sees the world only from the master's standpoint; the subaltern whose white mask has penetrated his black skin; the child who lives to please her teachers and parents. In these cases, the moment of democracy requires an element of conflict if a new self is to emerge.

Yet, in my view, this is not incompatible with dialogue and recognition. Democracy, in the words of my teacher Kenneth Benne, need not be an either/or. It sometimes requires a both/and. The self, as I see it, does not just emerge, once and for all, out of conflict, nor does it take its final shape when it gains recognition and in turn recognizes the other. Rather, selves continue to surprise us, take on new dimensions, engage in different conflicts, and provoke new dialogues and more complete forms of recognition. Todd provides us with a needed corrective to the "why can't we all just get along" school of democracy. The alternative is not, however, never-ending contestation and conflict — the Master-slave relationship writ large and forever. Instead, the alternative is the production of selves that have the capacity to appropriate the understandings of others to reflect on their own development with the understanding of the evolutionary potential in us all.

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).