

# Identity and Self- Consciousness

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel  
(1770-1831)

*Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)

# How does a human being come to consciousness of him- or herself?

- Humans are not born with a sense of self, with a sense that “I am . . . .” The self is made in a “dialectical social process of interrelationships among selves” (*Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*).
- We acquire self-consciousness from meeting something (or someone) that is not the self, someone who is not us (“not-self”).
- The reality of the discovered self requires that 1.) we have a consciousness of ourselves as self and 2.) that other human beings acknowledge our existence (“being-for-others”).

# Selfhood and Dialectical Process

- Selves are made, not born; selfhood is a social fact.
- Through a dialectical process [thesis—antithesis—synthesis (over time—history—movement and change)] of interrelationships, the self moves throughout time (stages of becoming) toward full self-consciousness.
- This movement is fraught with conflict and tension.

# Master-Slave Dialectic

- Human beings coming into consciousness oppose each other since they resent the need of the recognition of the other: psychological and social power distinct from physical force or wealth.
- Each prefers continued recognition from the other without having to return recognition—power that overrides dependency.
- One result/model is a Master-Slave relationship or dialectic in which the master allows the slave to exist (to live) while the slave gives the master recognition and service.
- But the master's self is ultimately uncertain because recognition is not given freely (slave has no independent self). The slave, however, achieves satisfactory self-consciousness through work (labor)—contact with the material world.
- Ironically, the master and slave rely on one another—dialectic (Mutual dependence on one another.)

# Master-Slave Relationship Characterizes Human Relationships

- Selfhood is a social product.
- Identity has to be constructed through a contentious interaction and relationships with others.
- Dependence on others produces fear and resentment and the exercise of psychological and social power.
- Full self-consciousness is difficult to achieve—ongoing process—meaning and truth attached to selfhood are in process.