

# A Guide to Reading Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

Nancy Bauer

I can't think of many things that are harder to read than Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This selection, most of which consists in a section the translation I'm giving you calls "Lordship and Bondage," is more commonly referred to as the master-slave dialectic. If you are not steeped in the history of German Philosophy and just dive into the Hegel, you will probably find yourself struggling. For that reason, I'm providing as you with Alexandre Kojève's reading of the dialectic, which is both a transcription of and a commentary. I recommend that you begin with the Kojève and check it against the Hegel as the spirit (no pun intended!) moves you. As you read, you should consult the Hegel text when so doing is appropriate. More on that piece of advice in a moment.

Kojève's interpretation of the master-slave dialectic is not uncontroversial. Some readers find that Kojève injects a decidedly Marxist perspective into his reading of Hegel. (Marx's philosophy is heavily dependent in many respects on Hegel's.) Still, I think that Kojève's interpretation is helpfully thought-provoking, and I've found that it's especially useful as one works through Hegel's unusually difficult text.

Kojève uses the convention of enclosing in square brackets—[like this]—those stretches of text that constitute his **commentary** on Hegel. The sections of Kojève's texts that are **transcriptions** of "Lordship and Bondage," on the other hand, have no brackets around them. As per the conventions governing quotation marks enclosing direct speech, if the bracketed (commentary) sections continue past a single paragraph, that paragraph will not contain a closing bracket.

The Kojève text begins with a long piece of commentary that spans pages 3 through 9. There is a dotted line on page 9. Right above that line, there is a sentence that is not in brackets; this sentence is from section 178 of the Hegel. With the exception of this sentence, Kojève skips sections 178 through 184. After that, his transcription of the master-slave dialectic is keyed to the sections of the dialectic as follows:

Kojève	Hegel	Kojève	Hegel
Right under dotted line on p. 9	§185	At paragraph indent on p. 18	§191
1st full paragraph on p. 10	§186	1st full paragraph on p. 20	§192
1st full paragraph on p. 12	§187	2nd full paragraph on p. 20	§193
3rd-to-last line on p. 13	§188	1st full paragraph on p. 21	§194
at 2nd paragraph indent on p. 15	§189	At paragraph indent on p. 23	§195
at paragraph indent on p. 16	§190	At paragraph indent on p. 26	§196

Again, my suggestion is that you start with the Kojève. Once Kojève has discussed a section (i.e., once you've reached the next part of his transcription), switch to the Hegel and read it directly. Then go back to the Kojève.