

# Frantz Fanon's Engagement with Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

by

Brandon Hogan, J.D., Ph.D.  
brandon.hogan@howard.edu  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy  
Howard University, Washington, DC

## Abstract

This article seeks to articulate an interpretation of Fanon's engagement with G.W.F. Hegel that does not either assume that Fanon rejects Hegel's normative conclusions or that Fanon's engagement is incidental to his larger philosophical projects. I argue that Fanon's take on the master-slave dialectic allows us to better understand the normative claims that undergird Fanon's calls for violence and revolution in *Black Skin, The Wretched of the Earth*, and *A Dying Colonialism*.

## Introduction

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (Black Skin) Frantz Fanon famously distinguishes the colonial master and slave from the master and slave as depicted in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Phenomenology).<sup>1</sup> According to Fanon, while Hegel's master seeks recognition from the slave, the colonial master seeks only work. Moreover, for Fanon, the Hegelian slave differs from the colonial slave because the former eventually gains self-consciousness and freedom through labor, while the latter seeks to be like his master—that is, he seeks to be white—and is thus unable to find liberation through labor alone.

I divide commentators on Fanon's treatment of Hegel in *Black Skin* into two camps: those who take it that Fanon seeks to reject Hegel's dialectic and those who believe that Fanon is sympathetic to Hegel. Commentators in the former camp disagree about whether Fanon is correct in rejecting Hegel. Those in the latter camp, I believe, interpret Fanon correctly but do not take Fanon's position on Hegel to be essential to understanding his philosophical project. That is, these latter commentators take Fanon's treatment of Hegel to be incidental to his larger views about the nature of Black subjectivity and the necessity of violent revolution in the French colonies.

According to the first reading of Fanon, Hegel's master-slave dialectic is inapplicable because it does not accurately describe the attitudes of the colonial master and slave and does not accurately present the mechanisms through which the colonial slave can or will achieve freedom. This reading, however, attributes to Fanon a mistaken understanding of Hegel. Reading Fanon charitably requires that we read him as understanding the *point* of the master-slave dialectic. Hegel's dialectic is not a description or allegorical reflection of the origins and dynamics of historical slavery. The dialectic is best read as illustrating a distinct type of failure that undermines person's ability to act freely.

Fanon's point is not that Hegel's master-slave dialectic is inapplicable to the colonial situation, but that both Blacks and whites in the Francophone world will face particular challenges if they wish to overcome the failure that is colonial domination. For Fanon, Blacks and whites lack freedom just as Hegel's master and slave lack freedom, but their lack of freedom is complicated by the phenomenon of anti-black racism.

If we wish to see Fanon as offering a comprehensive critique of colonialism—one that, among other things, explains the effects of colonial subjugation and explains why this subjugation is wrong—we should read him as offering a conception of freedom. In reading Fanon as critical of Hegel, we deprive him of the Hegelian conception of freedom that he seems to implicitly rely on in *Black Skin, The Wretched of the Earth* (The Wretched), and *A Dying Colonialism*.

I contend, then, that Fanon's reading of Hegel is not incidental to his larger views, but allows us to see those views as unified by a common conception of personal and national freedom that *justifies* his call for violent revolution in *The Wretched*. While I do not claim that Fanon is a Hegelian—or that he thought of himself as a Hegelian—I argue that my interpretive suggestion allows us to make better sense of Fanon's engagement with Hegel. To be sure, this work does not purport to be the final word on Hegel's master-slave dialectic or Fanon's engagement with Hegel's dialectic. I am to offer a plausible perspective on Fanon's engagement with Hegel that goes missing in the current scholarship. Indeed, this work does not purport to be a sustained piece of Fanon scholarship, but an analytic interpretive suggestion.

In the following section, I explain the two schools of interpretation regarding Fanon on Hegel. In the following section, I reconstruct and discuss Fanon's argument in the section of *Black Skin* titled, "The Black Man and Hegel." I contend that Fanon embraces Hegel's abstract conception of freedom. This discussion provides a context for my discussion of Fanon's comments on the master-slave dialectic. I contend that this discussion is best understood in light of Fanon's understanding of Hegelian freedom. I next argue for my interpretation of Fanon's discussion of the dialectic, demonstrating why rival interpretations are problematic. In the final section, I briefly argue that our reading of Fanon's corpus is enhanced if we attribute to him the Hegelian conception of freedom.

## Two Schools of Interpretation Regarding Fanon on Hegel

Understandably, most philosophers who write about *Black Skin* pay a minimal amount of attention to Fanon's commentary on Hegel. The section titled, "The Black Man and Hegel" only occupies seven pages of the 206-page book.

Several commentators have taken it that Fanon's point in discussing Hegel is that of demonstrating that Hegel's theoretical framework is inapplicable to the colonial situation.<sup>2</sup> Ato Sekyi-Out (1996) claims that Fanon believes that he (Fanon) and Hegel represent two "entirely different universe[s] of discourse."<sup>3</sup> Kleinberg (2003) takes it that Fanon's position is that the Hegelian system and the colonial system are "incompatible," and proceed to argue that "...in his attempt to distance the colonial slave from the Hegelian Slave, Fanon actually parallels Hegel's movements."<sup>4</sup> Against Kleinberg, Honenberger (2007) argues that Fanon successfully distinguishes the colonial situation from Hegel's discussion of mastery and slavery and thus demonstrates that Hegel's discussion "does not apply to the relation between white, colonial master and black, colonized slave."<sup>5</sup>

Gordon (2015) also seems to adopt this reading of Fanon on Hegel in his recent book, *What Fanon Said*.<sup>6</sup> Gordon notes that Fanon does not consider Hegel's discussion of mastery and slavery in the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel further demonstrates the necessity of a state structured by relations of reciprocal recognition. But Gordon cautions against taking this omission as evidence that Fanon believed that such a state would emerge in spite of the history of racial domination in France and in the French colonies.<sup>7</sup> For Gordon, Fanon believes that Hegel's conception of reciprocal recognition "fails" in the colonial context because the white master does not want recognition, but only work, from the Black slave.<sup>8</sup> Gordon, along with the other commentators in this first group, agree that Fanon seeks to reject Hegel. Only Kleinberg (2003) believes that he is wrong to do so.

The second group of commentators reads Fanon as embracing Hegel's dialectic, at least in part. Bird-Pollan contends that Fanon accepts Hegel's conception of recognition and seeks to explain how racism distorts recognition. Bird-Pollan writes:

Fanon's reading of Hegel's theory of recognition in *Black Skin* is...an immanent critique of the paradigm of recognition employed by the colonizer from the perspective of the black man for whom this paradigm has been suspended. The point is that while the story of recognition is fundamental its concrete instantiation has been thoroughly distorted by racist and colonial society.<sup>9</sup>

While the Bird-Pollan (2015) interpretation of Fanon is largely correct, he does not *argue* for this interpretation or against its rivals. Additionally, Bird-Pollan (2015) does not provide a detailed account of Fanon's discussion of Hegel, nor does he explain how this discussion relates to Fanon's call for violence in *The Wretched*. Further, Bird-Pollan (2015) does not articulate the relationship between recognition and freedom, an understanding of which is essential to an illuminating interpretation of Fanon's engagement with Hegel.

Lou Turner (1996) occupies a liminal position in this debate, offering a nuanced discussion of Fanon on Hegel. Turner (1996) writes that Fanon's discussion of Hegel is an "evisceration" of the Hegelian view that "absolute reciprocity" lies at the base of social progress. Turner writes:

The absolute reciprocity of Hegel's dialectic is an historical presupposition of the natural, no less than human, reality from which his concept of self-consciousness is deduced. The presumed racial homogeneity of differentiated class strata presupposed in the absolute reciprocity of Hegel's master-slave dialectic is occluded as a consequence of Fanon's interrogation....<sup>10</sup>

For Turner, Fanon rejects the Hegelian dialectic to the extent that it does not take account of racism. Turner also believes that Fanon does not completely reject Hegel because he (Fanon) recognizes that the master-slave dialectic is a "pure form" that "necessarily breaks down into real, historical, relative forms, but that the pure form is the way in which to comprehend the historical reality of the latter form."<sup>11</sup> For Turner's Fanon, Hegel's master-slave dialectic is the model that we should use to understand Black subjugation.

I find Turner's position problematic. It appears odd that Fanon would both seek the "evisceration" of Hegel's dialectic but also take it that colonial subjugation should be understood on the model of the dialectic. Additionally, this interpretation is not argued for and Turner fails to explain the role that Hegel's dialectic plays in Fanon's corpus. Finally, Turner's reading is not inconsistent with the view that Fanon's treatment of Hegel is incidental to his larger views. I contend that previous interpreters of Fanon either misunderstand Fanon's discussion of Hegel or do not fully explore the relationship between that discussion and Fanon's larger philosophical aims.

In the following section, I outline the main arguments of the section of *Black Skin* titled "The Black Man and Hegel," to provide a context for Fanon's discussion of the master-slave dialectic.

## Fanon Embraces Hegel's Abstract Conception of Freedom

In this section of *Black Skin*, Fanon argues for two, related conclusions: (1) Blacks and whites in the Francophone world are not free, and (2) Black political freedom exists as a barrier to Black worth and Black self-recognition. We can understand Fanon's arguments as follows.

*First argument:*

P1. Being free is a matter of (a) adhering to norms of one's choosing and (b) being recognized as such by those persons one recognizes in turn.

P2. Blacks do not adhere to norms of their choosing and whites only recognize themselves.

Conclusion: Both Blacks and whites are not free.

*Second argument:*

P3: Only persons who have engaged in a struggle for recognition are both worthy of recognition and know that they are worthy of recognition.

P4. Because Blacks are politically free and did not have to fight for their freedom from slavery, they are less likely to struggle for recognition.

Conclusion: Black political freedom exists as a barrier to Black worth and Black self-recognition.

Fanon borrows P1 and P3 from Hegel and justifies each premise by referencing Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Consequently, to fully understand Fanon's arguments we should explore Hegel's justification of P1 and P3 as presented in the *Phenomenology*.

Hegel's *Phenomenology* itself is an allegorical account of humanity's rise to full self-consciousness. "Consciousness" is Hegel's personification of human self-understanding. At the beginning of the section entitled "Self-Consciousness," consciousness views itself as authoritative over nature. Nature, for consciousness, exists as a means to satisfy its desires. Consciousness, then, takes itself to be *entitled* to do as it wishes with natural objects. But to view itself as authoritative in this way, consciousness must actually *exercise* its authority. Consciousness uses natural objects not only to satisfy its desires, but to prove to itself that those objects are not important in themselves, but only to the extent that they can be used to satisfy its desires.<sup>12</sup>

However, this way of relating to the world proves to be unsatisfactory. Hegel points out an important way in which the mere consumption and destruction of natural objects fail to affirm consciousness's self-conception. Consciousness simply *imposes* its will on those objects, which is not to recognize natural objects as *in themselves* subordinate to its will. In destroying objects, consciousness essentially tells itself that its desires are paramount. Consciousness realizes that its subjective certainty is not the same as an objective fact. Consciousness, then, must find an object that will show itself as subordinate on its own accord.

Hegel takes it that no merely natural object can independently show itself to be subordinate to the will of consciousness. Trees and animals do not speak and thus cannot assert their subordinate status or affirm the authority of consciousness. Hegel writes:

Since the object [the object that will affirm the authority of consciousness] is in its own self negation, and in being so is at the same time independent, it is consciousness...*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*<sup>13</sup>

For Hegel, the only object that can affirm consciousness's self-conception is another conscious being. The independent, rational individual is able to assure consciousness that it is in fact authoritative, that it is not mistaken in this regard.

Fanon takes on Hegel's conclusion. Both Hegel and Fanon believe that solipsism, mere self-affirmation, is insufficient for a coherent self-conception. Fanon writes:

In its immediacy, self-consciousness is simply being-for-self. In order to achieve certainty of oneself, one has to integrate the concept of recognition. Likewise, the other is waiting for our recognition so as to blossom into the universal self-consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Fanon and Hegel believe that mutual recognition is necessary if an individual or a group is to have a coherent self-conception. Fanon derives his third premise from Hegel's description of the life-and-death struggle, but recasts Hegel's claim using the concept of worth. Fanon writes:

[Man's] human worth and reality depend on this other and on his recognition by the other. It is in this other that the meaning of his life is condensed.[...]Only conflict and the risk it implies can...make human reality, in-itself-for-itself, come true. This risk implies that I go beyond life toward an ideal which is the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth.<sup>15</sup>

Fanon takes it that persons are only worthy of recognition to the extent that they are willing to risk their lives to attain recognition. Following Hegel, Fanon holds that persons may be recognized absent a struggle, but persons recognized in this way cannot coherently recognize themselves as *worthy* of recognition.

The first part of Fanon's second premise—that Blacks do not adhere to norms of their choosing—is justified throughout *Black Skin*. In the section titled "The Black Man and Language," Fanon points out that Blacks in the Francophone world view creole as inferior to the dialects of French whites. To speak "proper" French, for this class of Blacks, is to approach the status of human. For Fanon, these Blacks wish to "prove at all costs to Whites the wealth of the black man's intellect and equal intelligence."<sup>16</sup> Blacks, then, see no value in Black speech and view whites as solely capable of affirming their intelligence.

In "The Woman of Color and the White Man," Fanon remarks "[i]t is commonplace in Martinique to dream of whitening oneself magically as a way of salvation."<sup>17</sup> For Blacks in Martinique, acceptance by whites is a way to achieve Hegelian self-consciousness.<sup>18</sup> In "The Man of Color and the White Woman," Fanon claims that Black men wish to be recognized as white and view the love of a white woman as sufficient for recognition of this type.<sup>19</sup> Fanon laments, "[a]s painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the Black man. And it is white."<sup>20</sup> Blacks, then, are not free because they only value whiteness.

Justifying the second part of his second premise—that whites do not recognize Blacks—Fanon claims that "[a] white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid."<sup>21</sup> For Fanon, "[t]he white man is locked in his whiteness," unwilling and unable to recognize non-whites or non-white values as worthy of esteem.<sup>22</sup> Because *reciprocal* recognition is necessary for freedom, the conclusion that whites are not free follows from Fanon's first and second premises.

In justifying his fourth premise—that Blacks are less likely to struggle for recognition because they are politically free—Fanon claims that "[o]ne day the white master recognized *without a struggle* the Black slave."<sup>23</sup> Blacks, then, are politically free in that they are not slaves. Fanon moves on to characterize the relative social positions of Blacks and whites, post-slavery. He writes:

The black man did not become a master. When there are no more slaves, there are no masters. The black man is a slave who was allowed to assume a master's attitude. The white man is a master who allowed his slaves to eat at his table.<sup>24</sup>

Again, Fanon references Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Fanon's claim, then, must be understood in light of Hegel's discussion of mastery and slavery. During the life-and-death struggle, consciousness and the other realize that they should not kill one another.

A dead person cannot recognize anyone and, as such, the death of either party would upset their shared aim. Both parties wish to be recognized not only as rational and authoritative, but as the *sole* authority. This tension is resolved by one party relinquishing the claim to authority. The relinquishing party, while rational, values its life more than its status as the sole authority. He agrees to be the slave of the other party—that is, he agrees to recognize the other party as the sole authority but does not seek this recognition himself. He becomes the slave, while the recognized party becomes the master.<sup>25</sup>

The master rules by fear. The slave obeys the master's commands because he<sup>26</sup> values life more than freedom. The master can conceive of himself as the sole authority because he is recognized as such by a being he/she now knows is capable of recognition. This relationship, however, problematic. The master realizes that he cannot achieve his aim—that of recognizing himself as the sole rational authority—by dominating the slave. Since the slave obeys the master's commands, the slave's actions are really the master's actions. The master initially sought an independent, rational agent that could confirm his self-conception, but the slave is far from independent. The slave's actions have the same normative significance of those of the master and thus do not allow the master to avoid the worry that he may not be what he takes himself to be. Thus, the master's aims are frustrated.

Fanon distinguishes between being a master and having the *attitude* of a master. Hegel also implicitly relies on this distinction. For Hegel, before the life-and-death struggle both consciousness and the other take themselves to be the sole authority. One only becomes a master, for Hegel and for Fanon, after one gains control over a slave. Thus, post-slavery, there are no literal masters or slaves. When Fanon speaks of Black slaves and white masters in this context, he must have something else in mind.

We would do best to understand Fanon as claiming that Blacks are not masters *not* because they do not own slaves, but because they do not set their own values, but simply adopt the values of whites. A master, in this sense, possesses one element of Hegelian freedom. The master abides by norms of his own choosing. He is autonomous. Some Blacks, for Fanon, have adopted the master's *attitude* in that they take themselves to be autonomous, even deriding those Blacks who do not speak proper French.<sup>27</sup> The Black slave, in this context, recognizes the authority of white values, but has no conception of his own authority.

Fanon's second claim, then, is that French whites do in fact abide by values of their own creation. Further, Fanon's position is that whites have allowed Blacks to participate more equitably in French society under the condition that they embrace white French values. White mastery is problematic, however, because, again, “[t]he white man is locked in his whiteness.”<sup>28</sup> The white master takes himself and his values to be authoritative, yet does not recognize the Black slave. Thus, Blacks and whites are not free just as Hegel's master and slave are not free.

Continuing the justification of the claim that Black political freedom exists as a barrier to Black worth, Fanon claims that because the white master released the Black slave from slavery, without struggle, the Black slave was deprived of the opportunity to engage in the type of struggle that would establish his worth. Fanon takes it that Blacks would like to struggle for actual cultural and political influence, but are denied these opportunities by white indifference or learned obedience. For Fanon, “[t]he former slave wants his humanity challenged; he is looking for a fight; he wants a brawl. But too late: the black Frenchman is doomed to hold his tongue and bare his teeth.”<sup>29</sup> Paradoxically, for Fanon, Blacks do not engage in the types of struggles that are necessary to establish genuine worth and self-recognition, in part, because they are politically free.

Just as consciousness must prove his worth through a life-and-death struggle, Blacks must prove their worth through a struggle for recognition. Fanon concedes that Blacks have fought for liberty and justice, but also claims that these fights have been for “white liberty and white justice..., for values secreted by [their] masters.”<sup>30</sup> Fanon’s claim, then, is that French Blacks have not proven to themselves that they value their values, their conceptions of liberty and justice. For Fanon, the historical aim of Black struggle has been that of becoming white. Political freedom and learned inferiority, in this case, exist as barriers to Black worth and Black self-recognition.

Fanon explicitly relies on Hegelian premises to establish two distinct claims about Blacks and whites in the Francophone world. These arguments constitute the general background against which Fanon discusses Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.

### **Fanon on Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic**

In the main text of *Black Skin*, Fanon appears to discuss mastery and slavery metaphorically. Whites are masters in that they embrace values of their own choosing, but do not recognize Blacks. Blacks are slaves in that they recognize whites but are not the source of their own values. Fanon's footnote, however, appears to reference actual masters and slaves. It is useful to quote the footnote in full:

We hope to have shown that the master here is basically different from the one described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition, but work. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of his liberation in his work. The black slave wants to be like his master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object.<sup>31</sup>

While Fanon finds the image of Hegel's master and slave useful in articulating his main argument, he wishes to also distinguish Hegel's characters from the colonial master and slave. As stated in the second section, many commentators take this footnote as evidence that Fanon seeks to reject Hegel.

Before assessing this line of interpretation, I turn to the concluding section of Hegel's master-slave dialectic in order to highlight the main upshots of Hegel's discussion. Hegel tells us that the slave's self-consciousness will be transformed by his activities as a slave. The slave is at first dependent on the master and understands himself as such, but there is something about his existence as a slave that allows him to eventually become independent, to think for himself.

First, the slave experiences the fear of the master (lord) and the fear of death, "the absolute Lord."<sup>32</sup> In this experience, the slave recognizes life as temporary, as fleeting, and comes to understand himself as not essentially bound to his natural existence. He must form a self-conception that is distinct from his merely natural self. Second, in being made to work for the master, the slave can distinguish himself from his immediate desires. He would like to eat or paint, say, but must suppress these desires in order to follow the master's commands. In other words, through working for the master the slave learns discipline. Finally, in creating objects not for his own consumption, but for the use of the master, the slave learns that he, by using his own mind and ingenuity, can leave his mark on the world. Hegel tells us that, "consciousness, *qua* worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence."<sup>33</sup> The slave's relation to the world is not one of pure consumption. He sees the world not as something to be dominated, to be mastered, but an arena in which he can express himself, his own mind.

While the master-slave dialectic begins with a conception of consciousness that sought to dominate the natural world, it ends with a disciplined conception of consciousness that is able to shape the world according to its will. Hegel believes that this new form of consciousness, while not yet free, is an essential step in the journey toward freedom.

As mentioned above, Hegel believes that true freedom is a matter of being both a master and a slave, both authoritative and responsible. One who simply acts as a master is not free because while he acts authoritatively, he is not an actual authority. Authority, for Hegel, is a status that is freely conferred by others. The authoritative person is *entitled* to command and, as such, others obey his commands freely, and not out of fear. Because the slave is not independent he cannot authorize the master to act. Additionally, the master does not even purport to be responsible to anyone or anything outside of himself. He simply acts in accord with his desires. Hegel believes that this is not a form of freedom, but a form of pure dependence on nature. The master is a slave to his desires and for this reason too he is not free. On the other hand, the slave is not free because while he is not controlled by his immediate desires, the master dictates his actions. The slave does not even purport to exercise authority.

The master is only free to the extent that he recognizes the slave as autonomous and thus able to grant or deny his (the master's) authority. In other words, the master must take himself to be responsible to something outside of himself if he is to be free. Moreover, if the slave is to be free he must reject the exclusive authority of the master and understand himself as authoritative and able to bind himself by norms of his own choosing. The slave's freedom consists in his becoming autonomous in the literal sense of giving a law to himself. Hegel's master and slave, then, represent two distinct types of failures. The master purports to exercise authority without responsibility and the slave takes himself to be responsible but not authoritative. The point of Hegel's discussion of master and slavery is, in part, to demonstrate that master-slave relationship is defective.

Commentators who interpret Fanon as holding the view that the master-slave dialectic is inapplicable to the colonial situation seem to attribute to Fanon a very specific conception of applicability. On this conception, the master-slave dialectic is applicable to an unjust situation if it both describes that situation and is able to offer a roughly accurate prediction of how the situation will resolve itself. For instance, the master-slave dialectic is applicable to workplace misogyny if it accurately describes both the attitudes of and relations between male and female workers and accurately predicts that female workers will gain a sense of authority and independence as a result of their work.

However, given this conception of applicability, it is hard to understand the master-slave dialectic as applicable to *any* unjust situation. Most unjust social relationships cannot be understood as arising out of a life-and-death struggle. Saudi women did not choose to relinquish power to Saudi men. Black Americans did not choose to be socially and politically subordinate to white Americans. Moreover, it seems safe to assume that misogynists never self-consciously sought recognition from women, just as anti-black racists never sought recognition from Blacks in the Americas or elsewhere.

Additionally, while Hegel's slave gains independence through his work as a slave, it is naive to assume generally that subordinated persons will gain a full sense of self as a result of the conditions their subordination. Thus, if applicability is understood in terms of description and prediction, it becomes hard to see how the master-slave dialectic could *ever* be applicable.

Moreover, even Hegel recognizes that the master-slave dialectic is not applicable to historical slavery in this naive sense. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel mentions several institutions of slavery and notes that persons often become slaves as a result of war and conquest.<sup>34</sup> In the *Lectures*, Hegel remarks that slavery was seen as a necessary element of ancient Greek life, as free citizens were expected to have time to participate in the political life of the state.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Hegel recognizes that actual slaveholding societies do not arise as a result of rationally calculated life-and-death struggles.

Hegel also does not take it that persons choose to become slaves because they value life more than having the status of sole authority. In fact, Hegel is well aware that persons do not *choose* to become slaves at all, but are forced into slavery. Thus, there is little reason to believe that Hegel views the master-slave dialectic as anything more than a philosophical tool, one designed to present a distinct conception of normativity.

Given that we should aim to interpret Fanon charitably—that is, as endorsing plausible claims—we should not attribute to Fanon a naive view about the applicability of the master-slave dialectic or read him as holding a mistaken view about Hegel's own perspective on the master-slave dialectic. A successful critique of the master-slave dialectic would have to be a *normative* critique—that is, it would have to demonstrate that Hegel's conceptions of freedom and self-consciousness, as articulated in the dialectic, are mistaken. If Hegel's conception of normativity is correct, the master-slave dialectic, as an illustration of that conception, applies to any situation in which normativity is at issue.

We can begin to discern the point of Fanon's footnote by considering the distinction Fanon draws between the Hegelian master and the colonial slave master. For Hegel, there is a type of reciprocity between the master and slave. Because the slave has engaged in a life-and-death struggle, the master recognizes the slave as the *type* of being that can provide the recognition he desires. Hegel's master fails in that he acts in a way that undermines the slave's ability to offer recognition. Fanon claims that the colonial master does not recognize the slave as *able* to offer recognition. For Fanon's master, the slave is not taken to be cable of having an independent, authoritative perspective on the world. This is why he “scorns” the slave's consciousness and merely demands that he work.

Additionally, Hegel's slave is able to overcome his fear of death and develop a sense of self that is not essentially dependent on his biological existence. The Hegelian slave develops a sense of his independence by shaping objects for the consumption of another. Fanon tells us that the colonial slave is unable to develop in this way because his primary concern is that of being like his master. Fanon's slave does not see himself and his ingenuity in the objects of his labor because the only conception of selfhood and creativity that he is able to contemplate is that of his master. For Fanon, the destiny of the colonial slave is not independence, but whiteness.

Given that Fanon's point is not that the master-slave dialectic is inapplicable to the colonial situation, we can understand Fanon as arguing that the white master is unable to achieve freedom not only because he is a master, but because he does not so much as recognize the slave as *capable* of recognizing others. Moreover, Fanon takes it that the Black slave is unable to achieve freedom not only because he does not view himself as authoritative, but also because the only notion of independence, selfhood, and authority in his possession is that of the white master. Fanon, it seems, does not reject the Hegelian conception of freedom as involving elements of mastery and slavery, but notices that Blacks and whites in the Francophone world must overcome *particular* barriers if they are to achieve freedom.

Blacks must fight for a conception of freedom that is of their own design if they are to be deserving of recognition, and whites must escape (or be forced out of) their normative solipsism if they are to be *in* themselves what they are *for* themselves. Fanon understands that Hegel's master-slave relation represents a distinct *type* of failure, one that can manifest itself in many forms. He uses Hegel's master-slave dialectic to explain the particular failure that is colonialism.

## **Fanon and the Hegelian Conception of Freedom**

Understanding the point of Fanon's discussion of Hegel in *Black Skin* puts us in a position to better understand the conception of freedom implicit in many of Fanon's writings, a conception the absence of which would undermine the power of Fanon's critique of colonial domination. In *The Wretched*, for example, Fanon tells us that colonized persons lack freedom not only because they are socially and economically oppressed, but also because they esteem Western values and do not value themselves. Decolonization, for Fanon, creates "new men," men who are free because they have overcome the domination and dehumanization that is colonialism and because they have learned to govern themselves by values of their own creation.<sup>36</sup> In doing so, the colonized break from the slavery represented by white values and embrace a form of mastery that comes from generating values of their own.

Tellingly, Fanon believes that the decolonization process will cause the colonized to reject (Western) individualism as an ideal. Individualism, Fanon asserts, entails a "notion of society of individuals where each is locked in his subjectivity."<sup>37</sup> Fanon tells us that the very process of decolonization requires a rejection of individualism and the adoption of terms like "brother," "sister," and "comrade."<sup>38</sup> In essence, we can understand Fanon as holding the position that freedom requires a rejection of the mastery that constitutes individualism and the adoption of a self-conception that is obedient to values of one's creation and a community of one's choosing.

Fanon gives an important theoretical role to the risk and sacrifice that constitute violent opposition to colonial domination. As we have seen, in *Black Skin*, Fanon argues that a struggle for recognition would both establish that colonized persons are worthy of recognition and allow the colonized to know their own worth. In violent struggle, one learns that one values the object or status struggled for more than one's biological life. Fanon famously picks up on this theme in the section of *The Wretched* titled, "On Violence."<sup>39</sup>

Fanon argues that decolonization is always violent because it seeks to "blow the colonial world to smithereens," and to "[demolish] the colonialist's sector, burying it deep within the earth or banishing it from the territory."<sup>40</sup> Because white colonists do not recognize Blacks as even capable of forming an authoritative, independent perspective on the world, "[c]hallenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints,"<sup>41</sup> but a violent struggle for Black self-determination and the control of land, institutions, and resources.

The violence of decolonization, Fanon argues, is "invested with positive, formative features because it constitutes [the colonized person's] only work."<sup>42</sup> Here Fanon alludes to his discussion of Hegel's master-slave dialectic in *Black Skin*. The Black slave is not liberated through his work because his only aim in working is to be like his master. True work, then, is liberating work, work that allows the slave to recognize his own authority and independence. Because the work that constitutes decolonization requires the colonized to embrace their own values and risk their lives for those values, the struggle for decolonization represents a mechanism through which the colonized may achieve freedom, in the Hegelian sense.

Violence, then, allows the colonized to gain a sense of self that is not constituted by the values of the colonizer. Fanon claims that "violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude."<sup>43</sup> Violence inserts an element of mastery into the character of the colonized, it "hoists the people up to the level of the leader."<sup>44</sup> In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon claims that the violence of decolonization fundamentally transforms the colonized, such that they find any subsequent effort to maintain colonization "impossible and shocking."<sup>45</sup> Thus, Fanon's belief is that violence not only has instrumental value in that it is essential to the process of decolonization, but also has intrinsic value in that it allows the colonized to form the type of self-consciousness that is essential for true freedom.

In discussing Hegel in *Black Skin*, Fanon lays out the fundamental features of a conception of freedom that is given further content in *The Wretched* and in *A Dying Colonialism*.<sup>46</sup> This conception allows Fanon to not only detail the process of decolonization, but to explain why colonization undermines the freedom of both the colonized and the colonizer. Admittedly, this conception of freedom is very abstract, as is Kant's notion of freedom as self-legislation. Both Fanon and Hegel believe that the content of freedom cannot be articulated *a priori*, but must be determined historically. Freedom, on this conception, involves both mastery and slavery, and Fanon, in many places, brilliantly points out the nuanced ways in which colonized persons remain trapped in slavery. Thus, far from rejecting Hegel, Fanon's corpus is unified by a conception of freedom that is implicitly Hegelian.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "slave" only to reflect Hegel and Fanon's usage. In reality, but Hegel and Fanon were discussing enslaved persons. The term "slave" carries the connotation that some persons are natural slaves or that the identity and personhood of enslaved persons are wholly captured by their enslaved status.

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<sup>2</sup> Nigel Gibson claims that Fanon's aim is not that of abandoning Hegel's framework, but he problematically characterizes Fanon's discussion of Hegel as a "critique," and emphasizes the attitudes that distinguish the Fanon's master and Hegel's master. See Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003): 29-41.

<sup>3</sup> Sekyi-Otu, Ato, *Fanon's Dialectics of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 56.

<sup>4</sup> Ethan Kleinberg. "Kojève and Fanon: The Desire for Recognition and the Fact of Blackness." In Tyler Stovall and Georges Van Den Abbeele, eds. *French Civilization and Its Discontents: Nationalism, Colonialism, Race*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003): 115.

<sup>5</sup> Phillip Honenberger. "Le Nègre et Hegel': Fanon on Hegel, Colonialism, and the Dialectics of Recognition." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* Vol.5: Iss.3, Article 15 (2007): 153.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Gordon. *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015): 69.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>9</sup> Stefan Bird-Pollan. *Hegel, Freud and Fanon: the dialectic of emancipation* (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015): 89.

<sup>10</sup> Lou Turner. "On the Difference Between the Hegelian and Fanonian Dialectic of Lordship and Bondage." in Lewis R. Gordon, ed. *Fanon: A Critical Reader*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 145.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>12</sup> G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A.V. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 109.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2007): 192.

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<sup>15</sup> Fanon 2007., 193.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel 1977: 115.

<sup>26</sup> I use the masculine pronoun only for simplicity and to reflect Hegel and Fanon's usage.

<sup>27</sup> Fanon 2007: 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 195n.

<sup>32</sup> Hegel 1977: 118.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995): 404, 409, 411.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 399-404.

<sup>36</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Richard Philcox, trans. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2005): 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1-62.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Franz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*. Haakon Chevalier, trans. (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994): 179.

<sup>46</sup> This, of course, is not to say that Fanon believes that the end result of decolonization is the creation of African states that resemble the state as articulated in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967). Hegel's aim in the *Philosophy of Right* is that of describing the types of state institutions necessary to support human freedom. His concrete descriptions stem from his more abstract understanding of freedom as involving moments of independence and dependence. Fanon, I argue, embraces this abstract conception of freedom. He can do so without embracing all of Hegel's political philosophy. In the same way, contemporary Kantians can embrace Kant's categorical imperative without endorsing all of Kant's applications of the imperative.