



REALITY IS A HISTORICAL PROCESS

GEORG HEGEL (1770–1831)



IN CONTEXT

BRANCH
Metaphysics

APPROACH
Idealism

BEFORE
6th century BCE Heraclitus claims that all things pass into their opposites, an important factor in Hegel's dialectic.

1781 Immanuel Kant publishes his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which shows the limits of human knowledge.

1790s The works of Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling lay the foundations for the school of German Idealism.

AFTER
1846 Karl Marx writes *The German Ideology*, which uses Hegel's dialectical method.

1943 Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist work *Being and Nothingness* relies upon Hegel's notion of the dialectic.

Hegel was the single most famous philosopher in Germany during the first half of the 19th century. His central idea was that all phenomena, from consciousness to political institutions, are aspects of a single Spirit (by which he means "mind" or "idea") that over the course of time is reintegrating these aspects into itself. This process of reintegration is what Hegel calls the "dialectic", and it is one that we (who are all aspects of Spirit) understand as "history." Hegel is therefore a monist, for he believes that all things are aspects of a single thing, and an idealist, for he believes that reality is ultimately something that is not material (in this case Spirit). Hegel's idea radically altered the philosophical landscape, and to fully grasp its implications we need to take a look at the background to his thought.

History and consciousness

Few philosophers would deny that human beings are, to a great extent, historical—that we inherit things from the past, change them, and then pass them on to future generations. Language, for example,



Certain changes, such as those brought about by the American Revolution, are explained by Hegel as the progress of Spirit from a lesser stage of its development to a higher stage.

is something that we learn and change as we use it, and the same is true of science—scientists start with a body of theory, and then go on either to confirm or to disconfirm it. The same is also true of social institutions, such as the family, the state, banks, churches, and so on—most of which are modified forms of earlier practices or institutions.

Georg Hegel

Georg Hegel was born in 1770 in Stuttgart, Germany, and studied theology at Tübingen where he met and became friends with the poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the philosopher Friedrich Schelling. He spent several years working as a tutor before an inheritance allowed him to join Schelling at the University of Jena. Hegel was forced to leave Jena when Napoleon's troops occupied the town, and just managed to rescue his major work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which catapulted him to a dominant position in German philosophy. In need of funds, he

became a newspaper editor and then a school headmaster before being appointed to the chair of philosophy first in Heidelberg and then at the prestigious University of Berlin. At the age of 41 he married Marie von Tücher, with whom he had three children. Hegel died in 1831 during a cholera epidemic.

Key works

1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*
1812–16 *Science of Logic*
1817 *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*

See also: Heraclitus 40 ■ Johann Gottlieb Fichte 176 ■ Friedrich Schelling 335 ■ Arthur Schopenhauer 186–88 ■ Karl Marx 196–203 ■ Jean-Paul Sartre 268–71

Human beings, therefore, never begin their existence from scratch, but always within some kind of context—a context that changes, sometimes radically within a single generation. Some things, however, do not immediately appear to be historical, or subject to change.

An example of such a thing is consciousness. We know for certain that what we are conscious of will change, but what it means to be conscious—what kind of a thing it is to be awake, to be aware, to be capable of thinking and making decisions—is something that we tend to believe has always been the same for everyone. Likewise, it seems plausible to claim that the structures of thought are not historical—that the kind of activity that thinking is, and what mental faculties it relies on (memory, perception; understanding, and so on), has always been the same for everyone throughout history. This was certainly what Hegel's great idealist predecessor, Immanuel Kant, believed—and to understand Hegel, we need to know what he thought about Kant's work.

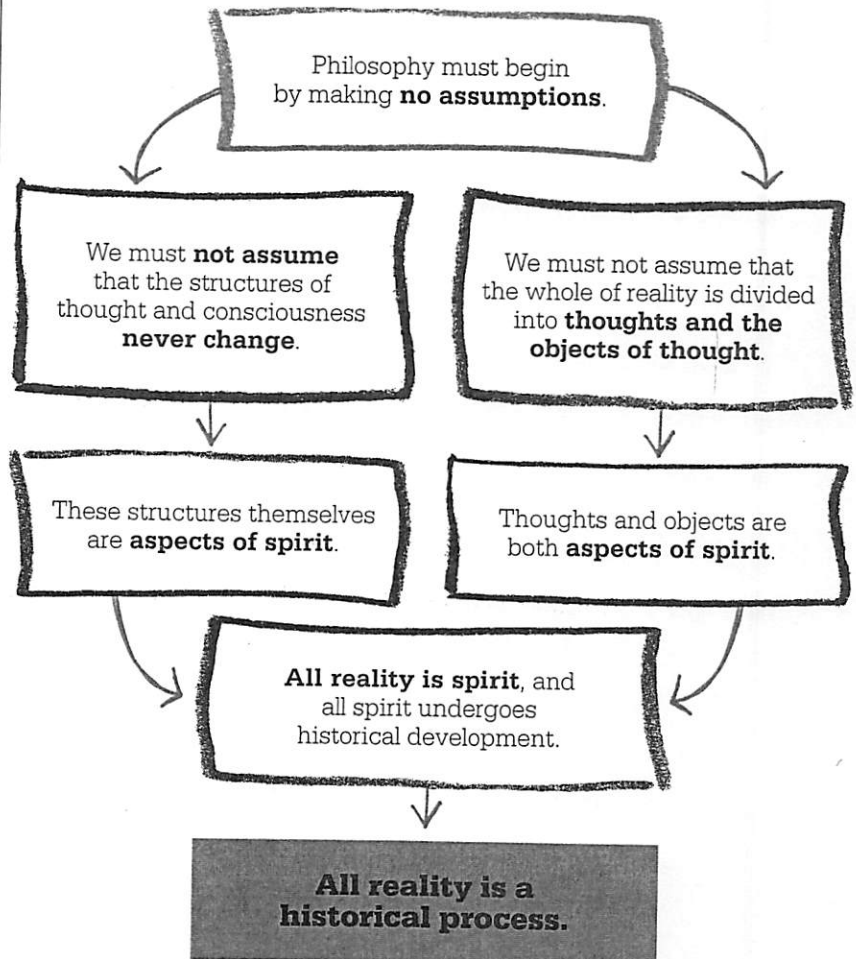
Kant's categories

For Kant, the basic ways in which thought works, and the basic structures of consciousness, are *a priori*—that is, they exist prior to (and so are not derived from) experience. This means that they are independent not only of what we are thinking about, or are conscious of, but are independent of any historical influence or development.

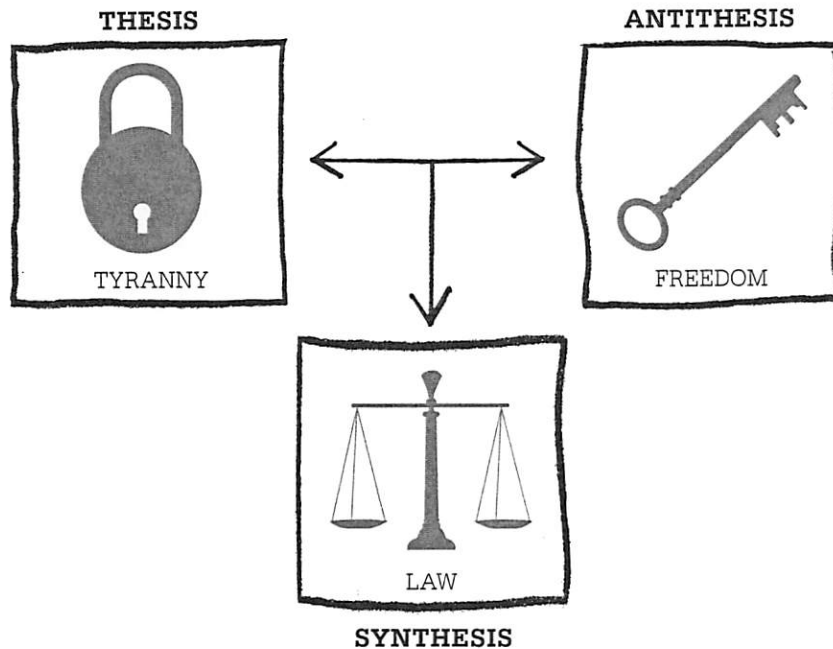
Kant calls these structures of thought “categories”, and these include the concepts “cause”, “substance”, “existence”, and “reality.” For example, experience

may give us knowledge about the outside world, but nothing within experience itself teaches us that the outside world actually contains, for example, causes and effects. For Kant, knowledge of the basic structure of the outside world is a *a priori* knowledge. It is only possible because we are all born with categories that supply us with a framework for experience—part of which is the assumption that there is an external world. However, Kant continues, this *a priori* framework means that the world as it appears »

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To comprehend what is
is the task of philosophy,
for what is, is reason.
Georg Hegel



Hegel's dialectic shows how opposites find resolution. A state of tyranny, for example, generates a need for freedom—but once freedom has been achieved there can only be anarchy until an element of tyranny is combined with freedom, creating the synthesis “law.”



is dependent upon the nature of the human mind, and does not represent the world as it really is—in other words, the world as it is “in itself.” This “world as it is in itself” is what Kant calls the noumenal world, and he claims that it is unknowable. All that we can know, according to Kant, is the world as it appears to us through the framework of the categories—and this is what Kant calls the “phenomenal” world, or the world of our everyday experience.

Hegel's critique of Kant

Hegel believes that Kant made great strides forward in eliminating naivety in philosophy, but that his accounts of the “world in itself” and the categories still betray uncritical assumptions. Hegel argues that Kant fails in at least

two respects to be sufficiently thorough in his analysis. First of all, Hegel regards Kant's notion of the “world in itself” as an empty abstraction that means nothing. For Hegel, what exists is whatever comes to be manifested in consciousness—for example, as something sensed or as something thought. Kant's second failure, Hegel argues, is that he makes too many assumptions about the nature and origin of the categories.

Hegel's task is to understand these categories without making any assumptions whatsoever, and the worst assumption that Hegel sees in Kant concerns the relationships of the categories to each other. Kant assumes that the categories are original and distinct, and that they are totally separate from each other—but for Hegel

they are “dialectical”—meaning that they are always subject to change. Where Kant believes in an unchanging framework of experience, Hegel believes that the framework of experience itself is subject to change—as much, indeed, as the world that we experience. Consciousness, therefore, and not merely what we are conscious of, is part of an evolving process. This process is “dialectical”—a concept that has a very specific meaning in Hegel's philosophical thought.

Hegel's dialectic

The notion of dialectic is central to what Hegel calls his immanent (internal) account of the development of things. He declares that his account will guarantee four things. First, that no assumptions are made. Second, that only the broadest notions possible are employed, the better to avoid asserting anything without justification. Third, that it shows how a general notion gives rise to other, more specific, notions. Fourth, that this process happens entirely from “within” the notion itself. This fourth requirement reveals the core of Hegel's logic—namely that every notion, or “thesis”, contains within itself a contradiction, or “antithesis”, which is only resolved by the emergence of a newer, richer notion, called a “synthesis”, from the original notion itself. One consequence of this immanent process is that when we become aware of the synthesis, we realize that what we saw as the earlier contradiction in the thesis was only an apparent contradiction, one that was caused by some limitation in our understanding of the original notion.

An example of this logical progression appears at the beginning of Hegel's *Science of*

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Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself.

Georg Hegel

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Logic, where he introduces the most general and all-inclusive notion of “pure being”—meaning anything that in any sense could be said to be. He then shows that this concept contains a contradiction—namely, that it requires the opposite concept of “nothingness” or “not-being” for it to be fully understood. Hegel then shows that this contradiction is simply a conflict

between two aspects of a single, higher concept in which they find resolution. In the case of “being” and “not-being”, the concept that resolves them is “becoming.” When we say that something “becomes”, we mean that it moves from a state of not-being to a state of being—so it turns out that the concept of “being” that we started off with was not really a single concept at all, but merely one aspect of the three-part notion of “becoming.” The vital point here is that the concept of “becoming” is not introduced from “outside”, as it were, to resolve the contradiction between “being” and “not-being.” On the contrary, Hegel’s analysis shows that “becoming” was always the meaning of “being” and “not-being”, and that all we had to do was analyze these concepts to see their underlying logic.

This resolution of a thesis (being) with its antithesis (not-being) in a synthesis (becoming) is just the

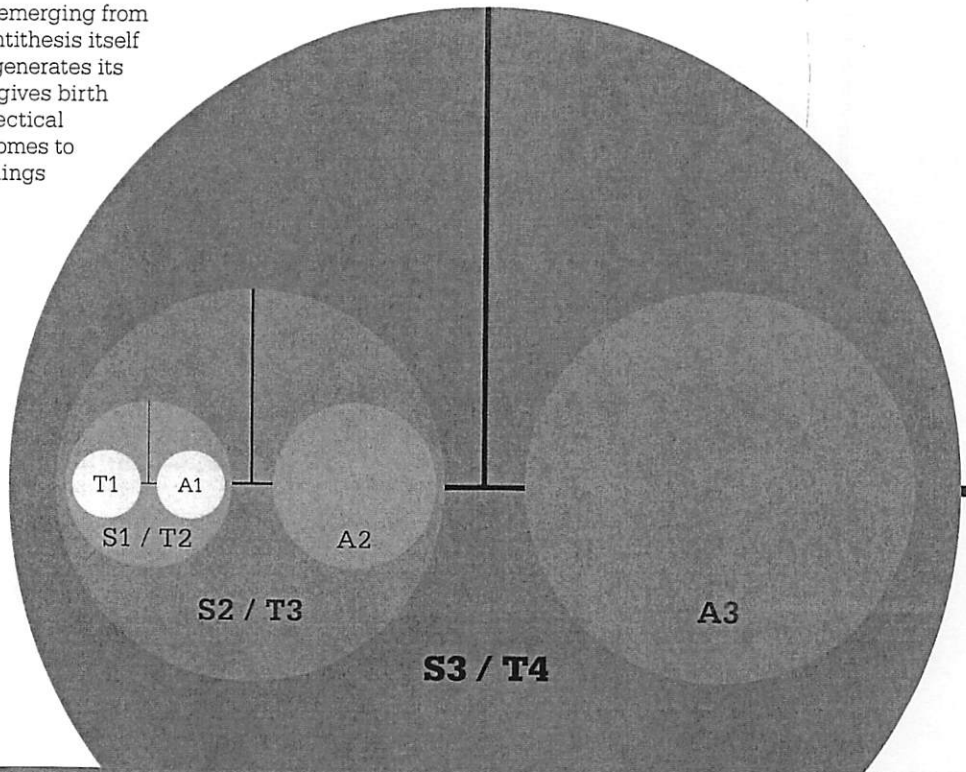
beginning of the dialectical process, which goes on to repeat itself at a higher level. That is, any new synthesis turns out, on further analysis, to involve its own contradiction, and this in turn is overcome by a still richer or “higher” notion. All ideas, according to Hegel, are interconnected in this way, and the process of revealing those connections is what Hegel calls his “dialectical method.”

In saying that the structures of thought are dialectical, therefore, Hegel means that they are not distinct and irreducible, as Kant maintained, but that they emerge from the broadest, emptiest notions by means of this movement of self-contradiction and resolution.

Dialectic and the world

The discussion of Hegel’s dialectic above uses terms such as “emerge”, “development”, and “movement.” On the one hand, these terms reflect something important »

In Hegel’s view, a synthesis emerging from an antagonism of thesis and antithesis itself becomes a new thesis, which generates its own antithesis—which finally gives birth to another synthesis. This dialectical process is one in which Spirit comes to ever more accurate understandings of itself—culminating in the philosophy of Hegel, in which it achieves complete understanding.



KEY

T = THESIS
A = ANTITHESIS
S = SYNTHESIS

about this method of philosophy—that it starts without assumptions and from the least controversial point, and allows ever richer and truer concepts to reveal themselves through the process of dialectical unfolding. On the other hand, however, Hegel clearly argues that these developments are not simply interesting facts of logic, but are real developments that can be seen at work in history. For example, a man from ancient Greece and a man living in the modern world will obviously think about different things, but Hegel claims that their very ways of thinking are different, and represent different kinds of consciousness—or different stages in the historical development of thought and consciousness.

Hegel's first major work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, gives an account of the dialectical

development of these forms of consciousness. He starts with the types of consciousness that an individual human being might possess, and works up to collective forms of consciousness. He does so in such a way as to show that these types of consciousness are to be found externalized in particular historical periods or events—most famously, for example, in the American and French revolutions.

Indeed, Hegel even argues that at certain times in history, Spirit's next revolutionary change may manifest itself as an individual (such as Napoleon Bonaparte) who, as an individual consciousness, is completely unaware of his or her role in the history of Spirit. And the progress that these individuals make is always characterized by the freeing of aspects of Spirit (in human form) from recurring states

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Each stage of world-history is a necessary moment in the Idea of the World Spirit.

Georg Hegel

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of oppression—of overcoming tyrannies that may themselves be the result of the overcoming of previous tyrannies.

This extraordinary idea—that the nature of consciousness has changed through time, and changed in accordance with a pattern that is visible in history—means that there is nothing about human beings that is not historical in character. Moreover, this historical development of consciousness cannot simply have happened at random. Since it is a dialectical process, it must in some sense contain both a particular sense of direction and an end point. Hegel calls this end point “Absolute Spirit”—and by this he means a future stage of consciousness which no longer even belongs to individuals, but which instead belongs to reality as a whole.

At this point in its development, knowledge is complete—as it must be, according to Hegel, since Spirit encompasses, through dialectical



Napoleon Bonaparte, according to Hegel, perfectly embodied the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) and was able, through his actions, to move history into the next stage of its development.

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Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a result, that only in the end is it what it truly is.

Georg Hegel

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synthesis, both the knower and what is known. Furthermore, Spirit grasps this knowledge as nothing other than its own completed essence—the full assimilation of all forms of “otherness” that were always parts of itself, however unknowingly. In other words, Spirit does not simply come to encompass reality—it comes to be aware of itself as having always been nothing other than the movement toward this encompassing of reality. As Hegel writes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, “History is a conscious, self-mediating process—[it is] Spirit emptied out into time.”

Spirit and nature

But what about the world in which we live, and which seems to go its way quite separately from human history? What does it mean to say that reality itself is historical? According to Hegel, what we ordinarily call “nature” or “the world” is also Spirit. “Nature is to be regarded as a system of stages,” he writes, “one arising necessarily from the other and being the proximate truth of the stage from which it results.” He goes on to claim that one of the stages of nature is the progression from that which is

“only Life” (nature as a living whole) to that which has “existence as Spirit” (the whole of nature now revealed as always having been, when properly understood, Spirit).

At this stage of nature, a different dialectic begins, namely that of consciousness itself—of the forms that Absolute Spirit takes in its dialectical progression toward self-realization. Hegel’s account of this progression begins with consciousness first thinking of itself as an individual thing among other individuals, and occupying a separate space to that of matter or the natural world. Later stages of consciousness, however, are no longer those of individuals, but are those of social or political groups—and so the dialectic continues, refining itself until it reaches the stage of Absolute Spirit.

Spirit and mind

At the time Hegel was writing, there was a dominant philosophical view that there are two kinds of entities in the world—things that exist in the physical world and thoughts about those things—these latter being something like pictures or images of the things. Hegel argues that all versions of this distinction are mistakes, and involve committing ourselves to the ridiculous scenario in which two things are both absolutely different (things and thoughts), but also somehow similar (because the thoughts are images of things).

Hegel argues that it only seems as though the objects of thought are different from thought itself. For Hegel, the illusion of difference and separation between these two apparent “worlds” is shown as such when both thought and nature are revealed as aspects of Spirit. This illusion is overcome in Absolute Spirit, when we see that there is

only one reality—that of Spirit, which knows and reflects on itself, and is both thought and what is thought about.

The “Whole of Spirit”, or “Absolute Spirit”, is the end point of Hegel’s dialectic. However, the preceding stages are not left behind, as it were, but are revealed as insufficiently analyzed aspects of Spirit as a whole. Indeed, what we think of as an individual person is not a separate constituent of reality, but is an aspect of how Spirit develops—or how it “empties itself out into time.” Thus, Hegel writes, “The True is the Whole. But the Whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development.” Reality is Spirit—both thought and what is known by thought—and undergoes a process of historical development. ■



German history had reached its end point in the Prussian state, according to Hegel. However, there was a strong feeling in favor of a united Germany, as personified by the figure of Germania.