



The dialectical method is a new type of logic, meant to replace deductive reasoning. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have mainly relied on deductive arguments. The most famous example is the syllogism (All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, etc.). Deduction received renewed emphasis with Descartes, who thought that mathematics (which is deductive) is the most certain form of knowledge, and that philosophy should emulate this certainty.

The problem with syllogisms and proofs, Hegel thought, is that they divorce content from form. Deductive frameworks are formulaic; different propositions (all pigs are animals, all apples are fruit) can be slotted into the framework indifferently, and still produce an internally consistent argument. Even empirically false propositions can be used (all apples are pineapples), and the argument may still be logically correct, while failing to align with reality. In other words, the organization of argument is something independent of the order of the world. In the generation before Hegel, Kant took this even further, arguing that our perception and our logic fundamentally shape the world as it appears to us, meaning that pure reason can never tell us anything about reality in itself.

Hegel found this unsatisfactory. In the words of Frederick Copleston, he was a firm believer in the equivalence of content and form. Every notion takes a form in experience; and every formula for knowledge—whether syllogistic, mathematical, or Kantian—alters the content by imposing upon it a foreign form. All attempts to separate content from form, or vice versa, therefore do an injustice to the material; the two are inseparable.

Traditional logic has one further weakness. It conceives of the truth as a static proposition, an unchanging conclusion derived from unchanging premises. But this fails to do justice to the nature of knowledge. Our search to know the truth evolves through a historical process, adopting and discarding different modes of thought in its restless search to grasp reality. Unlike in a deductive process, where incorrect premises will lead to incorrect conclusions, we often begin with an incorrect idea and then, through trial and error, eventually adopt the correct one.

Deductive reasoning not only mischaracterizes the historical growth of knowledge, but it also is unable to deal with the changing nature of reality itself. The world we know is constantly evolving, shifting, coming to being and passing away. No static formula or analysis—Newton's equations or Kant's metaphysics, for example—could possibly describe reality adequately. To put this another way, traditional logic is mechanistic; it conceives reality as a giant machine with moving, interlocking parts, and knowledge as being a sort of blue-print or diagram of the machine. Hegel prefers the organic metaphor.

To use Hegel's own example, imagine that we are trying to describe an oak tree. Traditional logic might take the mature tree, divide it into anatomical sections that correspond with those of other trees, and end with a description in general terms of a static tree. Hegel's method, by contrast, would begin with the acorn, and observe the different stages it passes through in its growth to maturity; and the terms of the description, instead of being taken from general anatomic descriptions of trees, would emerge of necessity from the observation of the growing tree itself. The final description would include every stage of the tree, and would be written in terms specific to the tree.

This is only an example. Hegel does not intend for his method to be used by biologists. What the philosopher observes is, rather, Mind or Spirit. Here we run into a famous ambiguity, because the German word *Geist* cannot be comfortably translated as either "mind" or "spirit." The edition I used translates the title as the *Phenomenology of Mind*, whereas later translations have called it *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. This ambiguity is not trivial. The nature of mind—how it comes to know itself and the world, how it is related to the material world—is a traditional inquiry in philosophy, whereas spirit is something quasi-religious or mystical in flavor. For my part, I agree with Peter Singer in thinking that we ought to try to use "mind," since it leaves Hegel's meaning more open, while using "spirit" pre-judges Hegel's intent.

Hegel is an absolute idealist. All reality is mental (or spiritual), and the history of mind consists in its gradual realization of this momentous fact: that mind *is* reality. As the famous formula goes, the rational is the real and the real is the rational. Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology* is to trace the process, using his dialectic method, in which mind passes from ignorance of its true nature to the realization that it comprises the fabric of everything it knows.

How does this history unfold? Many have described the dialectic process as consisting of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. The problem with this characterization is that Hegel never used those terms; and as we've seen he disliked logical formulas. Nevertheless, the description does manage to give a taste of Hegel's procedure. Mind, he thought, evolved through stages, which he calls "moments." At each of these moments, mind takes a specific form, in which it attempts to grapple with its reality. However, when mind has an erroneous conception of itself or its reality (which is just mind itself in another guise), it reaches an impasse, where it seems to encounter a contradiction. This contradiction is overcome via a synthesis, where the old conception and its contradiction are accommodated in a wider conception, which will in turn reach its own impasse, and so on until the final stage is reached.

This sounds momentous and mysterious (and it is), but let me try to illustrate it with a metaphor.

Imagine a cell awoke one day in the human body. At first, the cell is only aware of itself as a living thing, and therefore considers itself to be the extent of the world. But then the cell notices that it is limited by its environment. It is surrounded by other cells, which restrict its movement and even compete for resources. The cell then learns to define itself negatively, as against its environment. Not only that, but the cell engages in a conflict with its neighbors, fighting for resources and trying to assert its independence and superiority. But this fight is futile. Every time the cell attempts to restrict resources to its neighbors, it simultaneously impedes the flow of blood to itself. Eventually, after much pointless struggle, the cell realizes that it is a part of a larger structure—say, a nerve—and that it is one particular example of a universal type. In other words, the cell recognizes its neighbors as itself and itself as its neighbors. This process then repeats, from nerves to muscles to organs, until the final unity of the human body is understood to consist as one complete whole, an organism which lives and grows, but which nevertheless consists of distinct, co-dependent elements. Once again, Hegel's model is organic rather than mechanic.

Just so, the mind awakes in the world and slowly learns to recognize the world as itself, and itself as one cell in the world. The complete unity, the world's "body," so to speak, is the Absolute Mind.

Hegel begins his odyssey of knowledge in the traditional Cartesian starting point, with sense-certainty. We are first aware of sensations—hot, light, rough, sour—and these are immediately present to us, seemingly truth in its naked form. However, when mind tries to articulate this truth, something curious happens. Mind finds that it can only speak in universals, which fail to capture the particularity and the immediacy of its sensations. Mind tries to overcome this by using terms like "This!" or "Here!" or "Now!" But even these will not do, since what is "here" one moment is "there" the next, and what is "this" one moment is "that" the next. In other words, the truth of sense-certainty continually slips away when you try to articulate it.

The mind then begins to analyze its sensations into perceptions—instead of raw data, we get definite objects in time and space. However, we reach other curious philosophical puzzles here. Why do all the qualities of salt—its size,

weight, flavor, color—cohere in one location, persist through time, and reappear regularly? What unites these same qualities in this consistent way? Is it some metaphysical substance that the qualities inhere in? Or is the unity of these qualities just a product of the perceiving mind?

At this point, it is perhaps understandable why Hegel thought that mind comprises all reality. From a Cartesian perspective—as an ego analyzing its own subjective experience—this is true: everything analyzed is mental. And, as Kant argued, the world's organization in experience may well be due to the mind's action upon the world as perceived. Thus true knowledge would indeed require an understanding of how our mind shapes the experience.

But Hegel's premiss—that the real is rational and the rational is real—becomes much more difficult to accept once we move into the world of intersubjective reality, when individual minds acknowledge other minds as real and existing in the same universe. For my part, I find it convenient to put the question of the natural world to one side. Hegel had no notion of change in nature; his picture of the world had no Big Bang, and no biological evolution, and in any case he did not like Newtonian physics (he thinks, quite dumbly, that the Law of Attraction is the general form of all laws, and that it doesn't explain anything about nature) and he was not terribly interested in natural science. Hegel was far more preoccupied with the social world; and it is in this sphere that his ideas seem more sensible.

In human society, the real is the rational and the rational is the real, in the sense that our beliefs shape our actions, and our actions shape our environments, and our environments in turn shape our beliefs, in a constantly evolving dialogue—the dialectic. The structure of society is thus intimately related to the structure of belief at any given time and place. Let me explain that more fully.

Hegel makes quite an interesting observation about beliefs. (Well, he doesn't actually say this, but it's implied in his approach.) Certain mentalities, even if they can be internally consistent for an individual, reveal contradictions when the individual tries to act out these beliefs. In other words, mentalities reveal their contradictions in action and not in argument. The world created by a mentality may not correspond with the world it "wants" to create; and this in turn leads to a change in mentality, which in turn creates a different social structure, which again might not correspond with the world it is aiming for, and so on until full correspondence is achieved. Some examples will clarify this.

The classic Hegelian example is the master and the slave. The master tries to reduce the slave to the level of an object, to negate the slave's perspective entirely. And yet, the master's identity as master is tied to the slave having a perspective to negate; thus the slave must not be entirely objectified, but must retain some semblance of perspective in order for the situation to exist at all. Meanwhile, the slave is supposed to be a nullity with no perspective, a being entirely directed by the master. But the slave transforms the world with his work, and by this transformation asserts his own perspective. (This notion of the slave having his work "alienated" from him was highly influential, especially on Marx.)

Hegel then analyzes Stoicism. The Stoic believes that the good resides entirely in his own mental world, while the exterior world is entirely devoid of value. And yet the Stoic recognizes that he has duties in this exterior world, and thus this world has some moral claim on him. Mind reacts to this contradiction by moving to total Skepticism, believing that the world is unreal and entirely devoid of value, recognizing no duties at all. And yet this is a purely negative attitude, a constant denial of something that is persistently there, and this constant mode of denial collapses when the Skeptic goes about acting within this supposedly unreal world. Mind then decides that the world is unreal and devoid of value, including mind itself as parts of the world, but that value exists in a transcendent sphere. This leads us to medieval Christianity and the self-alienated soul, and so on.

I hope you see by now what I mean by a conception not being able to be acted out without a contradiction. Hegel thought that mind progressed from one stage to another until finally the world was adequate to the concept and vice versa; indeed, at this point the world and the concept would be one, and the real would be rational and the rational real. Thought, action, and world would be woven into one harmonious whole, a seamless fabric of reason.

I am here analyzing Hegel in a distinctly sociological light, which is easily possible in many sections of the text. However, I think this interpretation would be difficult to justify in other sections, where Hegel seems to be making the metaphysical claim that all reality (not just the social world) is mental and structured by reason. Perhaps one could make the argument on Kantian grounds that our mental apparatus, as it evolves through time, shapes the world we experience in progressively different ways. But this would seem to require a lot more traditional epistemology than I see here in the text.

In a nutshell, this is what I understand Hegel to be saying. And I have been taking pains to present his ideas (as far as I understand them) in as positive and coherent a light as I can. So what are we to make of all this?

A swarm of criticisms begin to buzz. The text itself is disorganized and uneven. Hegel spends a great deal of time on seemingly minor subjects, and rushes through major developments. He famously includes a long, tedious section on phrenology (the idea that the shape of the skull reveals a person's personality), while devoting only a few, very obscure pages to the final section, Absolute Knowledge, which is the entire goal of the development. This latter fact is partially explained by the book's history. Hegel made a bad deal with his publisher, and had to rush the final sections.

As for prose, the style of this book is so opaque that it could not have been an accident. Hegel leaves many important terms hazily defined, and never justifies his assumptions nor clarifies his conclusions. Obscurity is beneficial to thinkers in that they can deflect criticism by accusing critics of misunderstanding; and the ambiguity of the text means that it can be variously interpreted depending on the needs of the occasion. I think Hegel did something selfish and intellectually irresponsible by writing this way, and even now we still hear the booming thunder of his unintelligible voice echoed in many modern intellectuals.

Insofar as I understand Hegel's argument, I cannot accept it. Although Hegel presents dialectic as a method of reasoning, I failed to be convinced of the necessary progression from one moment to the next. Far from a series of progressive developments, the pattern of the text seemed, rather, to be due entirely to Hegel's whim.

Where Hegel is most valuable, I think, is in his emphasis on history, especially on intellectual history. This is something entirely lacking in his predecessors. He is also valuable for his way of seeing mind, action, and society as interconnected; and for his observation that beliefs and mentalities are embodied in social relations.

In sum, I am left with the somewhat lame conclusion that Hegel's canonical status is well-deserved, but so is his controversial reputation. He is infuriating, exasperating, and has left a dubious legacy. But his originality is undeniable, his influence is pervasive, and his legacy, good or bad, will always be with us.

The Resurrection of Hegel

Hegel has enjoyed a resurgence of interest and popularity at various times over the last 80 years.

Much of the philosophy that appeals to me personally couldn't have been achieved except on the shoulders of this giant.

Some of this later philosophy endorses aspects of Hegel, some rebels against it, some adapts it.

Reading this work was part of an exercise in understanding why. What insights did he have, and why do they appeal?

Did his philosophy achieve any unique truth or version of the truth or approach to the truth?

For me, ultimately, Hegel is just as much a point of departure as a point of arrival or destination.

From a literary point of view, Hegel is a terrible writer whose work does its best to defy any attempt to distill it down to some great sentences and phrases and/or some great ideas.

The extent to which these ideas are Hegel's ideas or unique to him or just a response to or tweaking of the ideas of others before him is for historians of philosophy to judge.

Hegel's work itself doesn't expressly acknowledge or cite the sources of the arguments to which he is responding. It's assumed that we are familiar with them.

It's like an enthusiastic undergraduate term paper completed under pressure of a self-imposed deadline (the imminent battle of Jena and conquest of Prussia). By the time pen meets paper, the 36-year old Hegel embraces them as the foundation of his ideas, but neglects to expressly acknowledge his inspiration and sources. Ultimately, like the embrace of his acolytes, his work and its system is a triumph of assertion.

As a result, a comprehension of Hegel is just as needing and deserving of annotation and secondary material as Joyce and Pynchon.

Towards the Negation of the Ovation

At an individual sentence level, Hegel is not always difficult, just mostly. He seems to throw multiple sentences at the reader, without necessarily communicating or effectively helping readers understand the sequence of his arguments. When it comes to Hegel's sentences, the difficulty results from the untamed collective, not the disciplined individual.

Still, within the rush or barrage of sentences, some sentences and phrases inevitably stand out.

The quality of these sentences, or their pregnancy, occasionally, with a meaning that is hard to divine, are the source of much of his appeal.

Indeed, it helps Hegel's case that they are so difficult to divine. Like God, it is not for us to fully comprehend his ways or his words. We are just supposed to trust them both. They appeal to our credulity and need to believe.

Many of Hegel's sentences and (catch-)phrases sound good, even if at first you don't really know what they mean.

The one phrase or catchphrase that most appeals to me personally is *"the Negation of the Negation"*.

Engels said that the Negation of the Negation is:

"A very simple process, which is taking place everywhere and every day, which any child can understand as soon as it is stripped of the veil of mystery in which it was enveloped by the old idealist philosophy."

One problem with Hegel is that he pretends that his System is a detection of what is present in nature, that it is the result of discovery, not the product of invention on his part.

As a result, it purports to be factual and real. If you disagree with it, then supposedly you are flying in the face of reality.

This rhetorical strategy is disingenuous. Of course, he created his System, no matter how much of it is based on or modified from the work of earlier philosophers. Of course, we have the right to submit it to scrutiny, to attempt to prove it right or wrong.

If Hegel pretends that he deduced his philosophy from first principles, then he is not being truthful. If he pretends that he discovered a method in the workings of nature and history, but reckons that he does not apply that method or any method in his own philosophy, then he is playing with semantics.

Hegel is just trying to make his subjective pronouncements critique-proof or un-critiquable. A reasonable enough goal, if it is confined to enhancing the robustness of his own pronouncements, but you can't deny readers the right to attempt a critique. That is one way guaranteed to alienate an audience, to split a following and push potential advocates away. Which is what happened, inevitably, after his death.

What I mean by this is that I don't accept that Hegel arrived at all aspects of his philosophy after a process of deduction. [Not that I'm saying anybody could have achieved this.]

Consciousness detects the outside world of nature, grasps it and drags it into the mind. The Subject consumes or ingests the Object, where it begins to relate to or play with it. It's almost as if the mind is an enormous database of images and responses that are preserved intact. They are ingested, but not digested or integrated into something new and different.

It's possible that the dialectic doesn't posit a synthesis because within the database both thesis and antithesis continue to exist. Subject to illness, loss of memory and death, nothing in the mind ceases to exist.

Self-consciousness is the awareness that this process is occurring. However, Hegel also regards self-consciousness

as desire itself.

The ultimate Hegelian Paradox is that the Philosophy is based on contradiction, yet the Philosopher [and his acolytes] will brook no argument.

The System is founded on the adversarial, yet disagreement is heresy (even if the Philosophy by its very nature seems to invite or attract heresy).

Similarly, it is reluctant to accept that a rational philosophical process or method is being utilised. It is enough to look, seek and ask questions. The answers are there waiting for us to find them. Truth and understanding will result from the only method that is necessary, an inquisitorial process. If you ask [God], you will be answered [by God, if not reason].

Still, the normal outcome of an inquisitorial process is a decision. In Hegel's Philosophy, it is not a human decision, but a divine revelation. Once revealed, it can't be questioned. It can only be respected, observed and enforced.

Hence, as is the case with all heretics, the sectarian non-believer attracts the attention of the Inquisition.

Hence, Hegel embraces both the Inquisitorial and the Inquisitional, having constructed both a System and an Institution.

It's up to us to determine whether to take a vow to Hegel or whether simply to do good.

Phenomenology of Spirit is notoriously difficult for a number of reasons. This book was, first of all written in a rush and delivered to the publisher without revision. Second, it is written in a "continental" style that pays little attention to clarity of argument. In order to tolerate Hegel's writing, I found that I had to become comfortable with following the rhythms of his thinking rather than worrying too much about formal argumentative structure. However, one of the most major reasons why this book is difficult to understand is because it deals with very difficult philosophical issues. Difficult ideas sometimes just require difficult language.

The book is an attempt to think through the unfolding of the history of world consciousness from beginning to end. Hegel uses the German word *Geist* in order to designate the substance of the universe. *Geist* is an ambiguous term that has been translated into English as both "mind" and "spirit." The idea is that the universe is a conscious, living substance that unfolds and grows the way that an organism grows. In the Preface (which, by the way, offers the most clear and concise summary of the ideas in the book), Hegel likens the universe to a plant that sprouts forth and progressively overcomes its early manifestations in order finally to produce a flower, which is the plant's ultimate goal and purpose.

The "flower" of *Geist* is what Hegel terms "the absolute idea." This is the point at which *Geist* comes to fully understand itself. The universe is like a mind that has become self-alienated, according to Hegel, and the history of thought represents the universe's attempt to return to self-consciousness. Over the course of the book, Hegel traces out the convolutions that *Geist* manifests as it reflects upon itself and struggles to come to terms with its own essence.

Perhaps the most famous and influential section of the book describes the master/slave dialectic. This is one of the early junctures in the unfolding to *Geist*. It occurs when a mind reflecting upon itself comes to value the sort of recognition and identity that it achieves through self-reflection. As a result, this mind seeks out other minds in order to see itself reflected in the consciousness of others. However, in so doing, this mind inaugurates a "life and death struggle." When two consciousnesses come into contact with one another, they struggle for domination and control, according to Hegel. One mind becomes the master and the other becomes the slave. The irony is that in mastering another mind, the master reduces it to a kind of property that is less than human, and so no longer capable of furnishing the sort of recognition that the master desires. The slave, on the other hand, in becoming enslaved, is forced to work and to creatively alter the world. It, thus, incorporates part of the master mentality into its essence and becomes transformed into something more than just a slave; it becomes a worker.

This example illustrates an ongoing dialectical process that governs the unfolding of all reality, according to Hegel. This process is one in which opposite forces come into conflict, but instead of simply contradicting one another, they instead become synthesized into something more than the sum of their parts. Over the course of the book, Hegel multiplies examples from the history of consciousness, showing the various ways the world's struggles have

contributed to the forward movement of history. History, it turns out, is an ongoing synthesis of various conflicts, all of which are inevitably leading to the full self-consciousness of *Geist*. Once *Geist* has come to understand itself, history (as conflict) comes to an end in the freedom of self-understanding.

Hegel worked out the details of his dialectical logic in other books, but the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is where he first showed how this logic plays itself out in the unfolding of the world's history. The influence of Hegel's vision has been enormous, stretching from his own lifetime to ours. Karl Marx applied the Hegelian dialectic to his analysis of class conflict; existentialist thinkers adopted much of Hegel's terminology in order to describe the unfolding of lived, human existence; psychoanalytic thinkers incorporated Hegel's views on conflict into their understanding of human consciousness; and political thinkers have applied Hegel's ideas to the relationships between nations and ideologies.

This is the general structure that inevitably falls out of subject-object dualism, and the first half of Hegel's book is largely focused on criticizing the structure of that dualism, which casts us back again and again into the inverted world and keeps us locked out of the possibility of truth. Hegel defines this problem as the situation of modern philosophy, ever since Descartes argued that epistemology is first philosophy, and that the foundation of philosophy is to understand how we reconstruct a mental image of the world and determine if those reconstructions are correct.

Hegel has two ways of dealing with this problem, and his solution constitutes one of his main contributions to philosophy. The first is to jettison the idea of the self as fundamentally a knower of objects out there in the world, and to replace it with an idea of human beings as actors, who live in a world that is given to them, and who know it not through consciousness of an external world, but through self-consciousness of their own lives. The second is to jettison the idea of subjective atomism and to argue - quite persuasively, I think - that human experience is fundamentally intersubjective; specifically, that all forms of experience are always already permeated by concepts, and that concepts are fundamentally intersubjective in their character.

This conceptual analysis of self-consciousness is part of Hegel's program for making philosophy "scientific," by which he means that spirit will give a full account of itself to itself *using concepts*. It will turn out in his fascinating chapter on religion that Hegel believes spirit has always attempted to work out an understanding of itself through religion, using images and representations, and that this is in fact *what religion is*. Religion, however, cannot recognize that this is what it is actually doing. It serves the spirit as a procedure for collectively deliberating about itself - that is, on the very ways that we collectively define our own ultimate sources of authority and value and then take them as binding - but it *thinks* it is actually discovering a truly-existent transcendent basis for its value and existence, which it calls God or the gods, or what have you.

It is only by *preserving the concept* that spirit can reflect on the ways in which ultimate values are collectively posited *without* losing hold of what it is actually doing and becoming confused, and taking the representations for the thing itself, thereby getting lost in the inverted world. Hegel argues, and I agree, that this requires conceptual analysis, and that this very process itself has only recently become possible for human beings. Prior to, say, the 18th century, it was possible to deliberate in sophisticated ways on the nature of the ultimate, but it is only after the Enlightenment that we have been able to deliberate on these matters *self-reflectively*, instead of doing so from within the closed framework of a particular value system.

The two tasks of Hegel's book, then, are to explicate the way that spirit comes to know itself, and to trace the evolution of its various historical forms or moments - to consider the various historically-bound shapes of spirit's self-understanding - in order to see how it is that we have now arrived at the point where we are at last able to do this work self-reflectively for the first time, not only grasping the spirit, but grasping it through concepts, philosophically - or, in Hegel's language, scientifically - so that the richness of its manifold content can be preserved and known, and not dissolved into some kind of generalized fuzzy idea of an absolute that contains everything but explains nothing.