

History of Philosophy

59 Hegel on Absolute Spirit

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes examines the complex philosophical legacy of **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel**, specifically focusing on his concepts of **Absolute Spirit** and **phenomenology**. Holmes contrasts traditional rationalist interpretations of Hegel with a **phenomenological approach** that views his work as a description of how consciousness—individual, national, and divine—unfolds throughout history. The text explains that Hegel viewed human **self-consciousness** as a finite manifestation of **God's own self-knowledge**, which achieves its highest expression through the triad of **art, religion, and philosophy**. According to this view, religious symbols serve as pictorial representations of truths that philosophy eventually clarifies into **pure rational concepts**. The discussion further tracks how Hegel's ideas branched into **left-wing and right-wing interpretations**, influencing thinkers like **Ludwig Feuerbach** and **Karl Marx**. Ultimately, the source illustrates how these shifts led to the development of **dialectical materialism**, where the driving force of history moved from Hegel's spiritual idealism to a focus on **material and economic conditions**.

Briefing Document:

Hegel and the Manifestation of Absolute Spirit: A Philosophical Briefing

Executive Summary

The following briefing synthesizes the philosophical frameworks of G.W.F. Hegel as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes, focusing specifically on the concept of "Absolute Spirit" and its historical-intellectual impact. Hegel is characterized not as a traditional 18th-century rationalist, but as a phenomenologist describing the unfolding "consciousness of being." This consciousness manifests in three tiers: the

individual (Subjective Spirit), the national (Objective Spirit), and the all-inclusive (Absolute Spirit).

Central to Hegelian thought is the premise that God's self-knowledge is objectified through the history of the universe. In this panentheistic model, human self-consciousness is a finite moment of God's own self-consciousness. This divine self-knowledge expresses itself through a historical triad: **Art** (mediated by images), **Religion** (mediated by symbols), and **Philosophy** (mediated by pure concepts). The document further examines the fragmentation of Hegelian thought into "Left" and "Right" wings, which directly led to the development of Feuerbach's religious humanism and Karl Marx's dialectical materialism.

I. Interpretive Framework: Hegel as Phenomenologist

Contemporary scholarship has shifted away from viewing Hegel as a deductive, speculative metaphysician akin to Descartes or Leibniz. Instead, he is understood through the lens of phenomenology.

- **The Phenomenology of Mind:** Hegel is not attempting to prove a system through abstract logic but is describing the "phenomenon of the consciousness of being."
 - **The Rational and the Real:** His dictum that "the real is rational and the rational is real" is a description of how consciousness unfolds, rather than a speculative lever for a metaphysical system.
 - **Levels of Consciousness:**
 - **Individual:** The self's awareness of its own being (e.g., the master-servant relationship).
 - **Societal/National:** The "Objective Spirit," where national identity emerges through law and constitutional government.
 - **The Absolute:** The all-inclusive consciousness of being, encompassing the totality of history and existence.
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II. The Nature of Absolute Spirit and God

Hegel's theology is fundamentally panentheistic, asserting that everything is in God, though God is more than the sum of the creation.

Divine Self-Knowledge

Hegel equates the Absolute Spirit with God's self-knowledge. Unlike static medieval conceptions, Hegel views this as a process:

- **Objectification:** God's self-knowledge is objectified in the world He creates and the unfolding history of the universe.
- **Human-Divine Interface:** God is conscious of Himself through human self-consciousness. Finite human consciousness is a "moment" of the divine consciousness.
- **Historical Development:** God contemplates His own perfection by contemplating His handiwork—nature and history. The movement of the Absolute becomes most evident in the creative expressions of humanity.

The Panentheistic Distinction

- **Contrast with Pantheism:** While Spinoza (a pantheist) viewed God and nature as coextensive and static, Hegel's God is a process.
- **Continuous Self-Consciousness:** Because history is unfinished, God's self-consciousness is continually expanding. "There is more consciousness going on in history."

III. The Triad of Absolute Spirit: Art, Religion, and Philosophy

The Absolute Spirit expresses itself through a historical dialectic of three forms, distinguished by their mode of articulation.

Mode of Expression	German Term	Key Medium	Characteristics
Art	<i>Bild</i>	Image	Uses sensory images (visual or verbal) to express the human/divine spirit. Moves from Egyptian (symbolic) to Classical

		(rational harmony) to Romantic (imaginative overflow).
Religion	<i>Vorstellung</i> Symbol/Representation	Uses pictorial representations and narrative (mythos). Traces history from Oriental pantheism to Greek polytheism to Christian Trinitarianism.
Philosophy	<i>Begriff</i> Concept	The "pure concept." Conceptualizes reality in a non-sensory, rational way, avoiding metaphor and story.

The Synthesis of Christianity

Hegel regards Trinitarian Christianity as the highest religious expression because its symbols—three in one, infinite spirit incarnate in the finite—most closely approximate the rational concept of the "one and the many."

IV. Theological Implications and Criticisms

Hegel's immanentistic theology reshapes traditional Judeo-Christian concepts.

- **Rejection of Transcendence:** Traditional "numerical distinctness" between God and creation is lost. God is entirely imminent.
- **Death of God:** Hegel uses this phrase to signal the end of the "picture" of a transcendent, distant deity.
- **Symbol vs. History:** Supernatural acts (the Incarnation, the Exodus) are viewed as religious symbols rather than historically literal truths. This creates a "ditch" between the "history of the story" and the "faith of the symbol."
- **Critique of Schleiermacher:** Hegel rejected the idea that religion is merely a "feeling of dependence," famously quipping that if that were true, a dog would be the most religious creature. He argued religion must involve the imagination and, ultimately, rational conceptualization.

V. Post-Hegelian Transitions: Left and Right Wings

Following Hegel's death, his followers split based on their interpretation of his dialectic and theology.

1. The Right Wing (Old Hegelians)

- **Perspective:** Conservative and orthodox.
- **Belief:** Hegel represented the "finest hour" of philosophy, a system to end all systems.
- **Legacy:** Influenced 19th-century evolutionary idealism and movements like the St. Louis School.

2. The Left Wing (Young Hegelians)

- **Perspective:** Radical and revisionist.
- **Focus:** Focused on *praxis* (action) rather than contemplation. The goal was to be an agent in the dialectical movement of history to change the world.
- **Key Figures:**
 - **David Strauss & Bruno Bauer:** Viewed God as a projection of the human spirit.
 - **Ludwig Feuerbach:** Argued that "man's God-consciousness is the self-consciousness of man." He reduced theology to anthropology/psychology, claiming we project our own ideals onto a hypothetical being.

3. The Emergence of Marxism

Karl Marx combined Hegel's dialectic with Feuerbach's materialism to create **Dialectical Materialism** (or Historical Materialism).

- **Inversion of Hegel:** Marx "turned Hegel on his head." Instead of the Absolute Spirit driving history, Marx argued that **material/economic conditions** (forces of production) drive the dialectic.

- **Economic Determinism:** History is not a manifestation of ideas but a result of class struggle and material changes.
- **Religion as Opiate:** Following Feuerbach, Marx viewed religion as a sublimation of human desires that distracts from the necessary action (*praxis*) in the material world.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Hegel on Absolute Spirit and His Philosophical Legacy

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical theories of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel regarding the Absolute Spirit, as well as the subsequent developments in 19th-century thought, including the emergence of Marxist dialectical materialism.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

1. How does the phenomenological interpretation of Hegel differ from the 18th-century rationalist interpretation? The rationalist interpretation views Hegel as a speculative metaphysician attempting to deductively prove a system, similar to Descartes or Leibniz. In contrast, the phenomenological view—taking *The Phenomenology of Mind* literally—sees him as describing the "consciousness of being" at individual, societal, and absolute levels.

2. What is the relationship between human self-consciousness and God's self-consciousness in Hegelian thought? Hegel posits that because God is the all-inclusive being, finite human consciousness is a moment of divine consciousness. Therefore, God is conscious of Himself through our self-consciousness, making human knowledge of self a finite instance of God's own self-knowledge.

3. How does Hegel describe the "Absolute Spirit" in the context of history? Absolute Spirit represents the absolute's consciousness of its own being

as it unfolds through the history of the universe. This consciousness is objectified in nature and culminates in the creative expressions of human culture, specifically through art, religion, and philosophy.

4. According to Hegel, what characterizes the "form of expression" used in art? Art utilizes images (the German term *Bild*) and imagination to articulate the consciousness of being. This creative activity moves through historical stages, from the symbolic nature of Egyptian art to the rational harmony of Classical art and the imaginative overflow of Romantic art.

5. How does Hegel distinguish between religious language and philosophical language? Religion speaks through symbolic representations (*Vorstellung*) and pictorial stories, such as the narrative of the Incarnation. Philosophy, however, utilizes the pure concept (*Begriff*), seeking to provide a non-sensory, rational conceptualization of the same truths religion expresses through imagery.

6. Why does Hegel consider Trinitarian Christianity the highest form of religious expression? Hegel views Trinitarianism as the pinnacle of religious thought because it synthesizes the "one and the many." It combines the infinite nature of God with finite expression, symbolizing how the infinite spirit is immanent throughout all of history.

7. What is Hegel's critique of Friedrich Schleiermacher's view of religion? Schleiermacher defined religion as a "feeling of dependence" on the absolute, to which Hegel humorously replied that a dog would then be the most religious creature. Hegel argued that religion is far more complex, involving imagination and symbols that can be translated into rational concepts.

8. In what way did Ludwig Feuerbach "turn Hegel on his head"? Feuerbach inverted Hegel's idea that man's God-consciousness is actually God's self-consciousness. Instead, Feuerbach argued that man's God-consciousness is merely the self-consciousness of man projected outward, effectively reducing theology to anthropology and psychology.

9. What is the primary difference between the "Old Hegelians" and the "Young Hegelians"? The Old Hegelians were conservative, believing Hegel had brought philosophy to its final, completed system of theoretical conceptualization. The

Young Hegelians, including Marx and Engels, sought to move from contemplation to *praxis*, focusing on using Hegelian dialectics to actively change the world.

10. How does "historical materialism" interpret the driving forces of

history? Historical materialism rejects the idea that concepts or the Absolute Spirit drive history, focusing instead on material and economic conditions. It posits that history is moved forward by the "forces and means of production" and the resulting class struggles.

Part II: Answer Key

Question Core Concept for Evaluation

- 1 Description of consciousness vs. deductive speculative metaphysics.
- 2 Finite consciousness as a moment of God's all-inclusive self-knowledge.
- 3 The unfolding of God's self-knowledge through historical objectification.
- 4 Use of *Bild* (images) and imagination; movement from symbolic to romantic.
- 5 Symbols/representations (*Vorstellung*) vs. pure concepts (*Begriff*).
- 6 Synthesis of infinite and finite; "one and the many."
- 7 Rejection of "feeling" as too limited; emphasis on rational symbols.
- 8 Identification of theology as anthropology; God as a human projection.
- 9 Contemplation/system-preservation vs. *praxis* (action/change).
- 10 Economic determinism; dialectic of material conditions and class struggle.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Dialectic of Absolute Spirit:** Analyze the triad of Art, Religion, and Philosophy in Hegel's system. How does each stage preserve and cancel out the previous one, and why is philosophy considered the final synthesis?

2. **Immanence and the Loss of Transcendence:** Discuss the implications of Hegel's panentheism on traditional Judeo-Christian theology. Specifically, address how his view of God's immanence affects the interpretation of miracles and historical revelation.
3. **From Spirit to Matter:** Trace the philosophical transition from Hegel's "Absolute Spirit" to Marx's "Dialectical Materialism." How does the shift from an idealist to a materialist interpretation of the dialectic change the perceived goal of history?
4. **Phenomenology and the Consciousness of Being:** Explain Hegel's project as a "phenomenology of mind." How does his description of individual self-consciousness (such as the master-servant relationship) scale up to describe the national and absolute spirit?
5. **The Role of Symbolism in Religion and Faith:** Examine the "ditch" between historical truth and religious symbolism in Hegelian and post-Hegelian thought. How does the focus on the *symbolic* significance of religious stories change the relationship between history and faith?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Absolute Spirit	The third stage of Hegel's triad (following Subjective and Objective Spirit) representing the Absolute's full consciousness of its own being through art, religion, and philosophy.
Begriff	The German term for "concept"; used by Hegel to describe the pure, non-sensory form of expression found in philosophy.
Bild	The German term for "image"; the primary mode of expression in art, involving imaginative thinking.
Dialectic	The process of historical and logical development involving a triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Dialectical Materialism	The Marxist philosophy that combines Hegelian logic with a materialistic view of reality, stating that matter (not spirit) is the fundamental substance.
Historical Materialism	A materialist interpretation of history which asserts that economic conditions and class struggles are the primary drivers of historical change.
Immanence	The theological concept that God is present within the world; in Hegel's view, God is so immanent that numerical distinctness from creation is lost.
Panentheism	The belief that everything is in God, but God is more than the sum of everything. Hegel is considered a panentheist because he views history as the ongoing process of God's self-unfolding.
Phenomenology	A descriptive study of the "phenomenon" or the consciousness of being as it appears to the self.
Praxis	Action or practice; the focus of the Young Hegelians who believed the purpose of philosophy was to change the world rather than just contemplate it.
Vorstellung	The German term for "representation" or "pictorial thought"; the symbolic mode of expression characteristic of religion.