

History of Philosophy

60 Post-Hegelian Idealism

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes provides a comprehensive survey of **post-Hegelian idealism**, tracing its evolution through various geographical and philosophical shifts. He highlights **Schopenhauer** as a pivotal figure who replaced Hegel's emphasis on reason with the concept of **will**, leading to a more pessimistic view of reality. The discourse also explores **personal idealism** in America and Britain, noting how thinkers like **Brightman** and **Bowne** adapted these ideas to address theism and the problem of evil. Holmes further examines how the movement influenced diverse fields, including **political theory** under Gentile and **aesthetics** through Croce. Ultimately, the text illustrates how different branches of idealism attempt to project the **human spirit** or consciousness onto the nature of the entire universe.

Briefing Document:

Post-Hegelian Idealism: Evolution, Themes, and Divergent Schools

Executive Summary

Post-Hegelian idealism represents a diverse philosophical movement that sought to project the nature of human consciousness onto the whole of reality. While Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel emphasized a rational, dialectical unfolding of "Absolute Spirit," his successors diverged into various schools of thought across Europe and America.

The most significant shifts included Arthur Schopenhauer's **Voluntaristic Idealism**, which replaced reason with "Will" as the core of reality, leading to a deeply pessimistic worldview. Concurrently, **Personal Idealism** emerged as a major force in American and British thought, pivoting from Hegelian monism toward a pluralistic

view where "personhood" serves as the ultimate metaphysical category. This document details these transitions, the major figures involved, and the subsequent influence of these ideas on aesthetics, politics, religion, and the later rise of existentialism.

The Core Project of Post-Kantian Idealism

The unifying thread of the idealist movement is the attempt to understand the external world through the lens of human spirit and consciousness. This approach posits that the self-consciousness of the individual is a microcosm of the absolute spirit. However, different philosophers emphasized different aspects of the human experience as the primary "mirror" of reality:

- **Hegel:** Reason and the rational dialectic.
 - **Schopenhauer:** The Will.
 - **Maine de Biran:** Feeling and romanticized consciousness.
 - **Personalists:** The individual person and their moral/creative capacities.
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Voluntaristic Idealism: Arthur Schopenhauer

Schopenhauer's philosophy represents a radical departure from Hegelian rationalism. He argued that the fundamental nature of reality is not reason, but an impulsive, driving "Will."

The World as Will and Idea

Schopenhauer distinguished between the world as it appears to us and the world as it is in itself:

- **The World as Idea (Phenomena):** This is the world of representations and symbols (logic, science, mathematics). It is ordered by human categories, which Schopenhauer termed the **Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason**.
- **The World as Will (Noumena):** This is the underlying reality. The Will is groundless, unified, and exists outside of space, time, and plurality.

The Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason

Schopenhauer identified four sets of a priori categories through which the human mind imposes necessity on the world:

Category Type	Domain	Necessity
Ground and Consequent	Abstract ideas and theoretical thought	Logical Necessity
Cause and Effect	Physical objects and events	Causal Necessity
Space and Time	Mathematical objects	Mathematical Necessity
Motive and Action	The self and moral agency	Moral Necessity

Pessimism and the Human Condition

Schopenhauer concluded that because the Will is an endless, blind striving, the world is essentially "the worst of all possible worlds." He identified three primary outcomes of this existence:

1. **Endless Striving:** Constant unsatisfied desire.
2. **Boredom and Pain:** The inevitable result when striving ceases or fails.
3. **Nothingness:** The goal of asceticism, which seeks to negate the Will and thereby negate the world.

Personal Idealism

In contrast to the monistic systems of Hegel and Bradley, Personal Idealism emerged as a pluralistic movement, particularly influential in the United States (centers at USC and Boston University).

Key Philosophical Tenets

- **Pluralism:** Reality consists of a personal God and a plurality of other persons, rather than a single "Absolute."

- **Metaphysical Primacy of the Person:** As argued in Edgar Sheffield Brightman's *Person and Reality*, the concept of "person" is the most accurate way to characterize what is most ultimately real.
- **Influence on Theology:** This school significantly shaped evangelical and liberal Christian thought in the mid-20th century, influencing figures such as Edward Carnell and Martin Luther King Jr. (implied via Brightman's influence).

The Problem of Evil and Theistic Finitism

Personal idealists struggled to reconcile a personal God with the existence of "purposeless evil." Because they rejected a physical order external to mind, they could not blame a material world for suffering.

- **Brightman's Solution:** He adopted **theistic finitism**, proposing that God is altogether good and wise but limited in power.
- **The "Given":** Brightman posited an irrational element within God's own mind—a "third evil"—over which God has no control.

Regional Developments and Key Figures

Post-Hegelian idealism took on distinct characteristics based on geographic and cultural contexts:

Britain

- **F.H. Bradley:** An early 20th-century neo-Hegelian who wrote *Appearance and Reality*. He distinguished the "Absolute" from "God," viewing God as merely the highest manifestation of the Absolute.
- **A.E. Taylor:** A theistic idealist who developed moral arguments for God's existence and authored *Elements of Metaphysics*.
- **William Temple:** Archbishop of Canterbury and philosopher who synthesized Platonic notions of goodness, truth, and beauty within a Hegelian framework.

Italy and France

- **Giovanni Gentile (Italy):** A political theorist who utilized Hegelian thought to provide the philosophical basis for fascism.

- **Benedetto Croce (Italy):** A major figure in aesthetics whose Hegelian-influenced theories remain influential.
- **Maurice Blondel (France):** A Christian philosopher who participated in major 20th-century debates regarding the possibility of a "Christian philosophy."

United States

- **Josiah Royce:** Taught at Harvard during its "golden age." He translated Hegel's "Absolute Spirit" into the American context as the "spirit of the community."
- **Borden Parker Bowne:** The founder of American Personalism, for whom the Hall of Philosophy at USC is named.

Philosophical Legacy and Transitions

The idealist movement provided the groundwork for several major philosophical shifts in the 20th century:

- **To Process Philosophy:** F.H. Bradley profoundly influenced Alfred North Whitehead, who transitioned the focus from "Absolute" to "Process."
- **To Existentialism:** Schopenhauer's pessimism and his focus on the "lived body" (the consciousness of being bodily) served as a direct precursor to existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.
- **The Ethics of Suicide:** Eduard von Hartmann, a follower of Schopenhauer, argued that suicide was the logical consequence of a world of unfulfilled Will. This theme was later addressed by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Study Guide:

Post-Hegelian Idealism: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide examines the development of idealism following the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, focusing on the various branches that emerged in

Germany, Britain, France, Italy, and America. It explores the transition from Hegelian rationalism to voluntaristic and personal forms of idealism, the metaphysical structures proposed by figures like Arthur Schopenhauer, and the theological implications of these systems.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

1. What is the defining characteristic of Arthur Schopenhauer's "voluntaristic idealism"?

Schopenhauer's voluntaristic idealism posits that the fundamental heart of reality is the "will" rather than "reason." While Hegel argued that the real is rational, Schopenhauer suggests that you understand reality in the image of the human will, making the aspect of the self that reveals the most about the nature of the world a driving, impulsive force.

2. How does personal idealism in America differ from traditional Hegelian idealism?

Unlike Hegelian idealism, which is typically monistic and focuses on an "absolute spirit," personal idealism is pluralistic, emphasizing "many minds" or persons. It asserts that the concept of the person is the most ultimately real category, maintaining a distinction between a personal God and other individual persons.

3. What is meant by the "fourfold root of sufficient reason" in Schopenhauer's philosophy?

This concept refers to four sets of a priori categories the human mind imposes on experience to create an ordered world of ideas. These categories include ground and consequent (logical necessity), cause and effect (causal necessity), space and time (mathematical necessity), and motive and action (moral necessity).

4. What is the distinction between the "body as an object" and the "lived body" in Schopenhauer's phenomenology?

The body as an object is a representation perceived through the senses and subject to the laws of physical necessity (phenomena). In contrast, the "lived body" is the conscious, immediate experience of being bodily, where every true act of will is simultaneously felt as a movement of the body.

5. How did Edgar Sheffield Brightman address the problem of evil within the framework of pluralistic idealism?

Brightman adopted a "theistic finitist" position,

arguing that God is altogether good and wise but not altogether powerful. He suggested that evil arises from an irrational "given" or element within reality—what he called "the third evil"—over which God has no control.

6. Why did F.H. Bradley distinguish between "the Absolute" and "God"? Bradley made this subtle distinction to avoid pantheism, the belief that God and the universe are identical. In his system, God is the highest manifestation of the Absolute, but the Absolute itself is a broader reality that encompasses all things.

7. How did Josiah Royce translate the Hegelian vision for an American audience? Royce shifted the focus from the Hegelian "absolute spirit" to the "spirit of the community." He adapted Hegel's political thought and conception of the state to fit American social concepts, emphasizing the importance of the community as the primary expression of reality.

8. According to Schopenhauer, what happens when a person attempts to repress or negate their will? Because Schopenhauer believes the world is a projection of the individual's will, negating that will results in the negation of the world itself. The state of "nothingness" is the ultimate result of asceticism and the repression of the will to see, think, or observe.

9. What is the difference between monistic and pluralistic approaches to the problem of evil? In monistic idealism, evil is seen as a part of the whole or the "shadow side" of the good, often losing its status as "real" evil. In pluralistic idealism, especially when physical matter is denied external reality, the problem of evil often rolls back onto God, necessitating theories like finite power to protect God's goodness.

10. What role did Benedetto Croce play in the post-Hegelian movement? Benedetto Croce was a significant Italian Hegelian who specialized in aesthetics and aesthetic theory. He is often noted for providing a more readable and accessible Hegelian perspective on the nature of art and beauty compared to Hegel's original dense texts.

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Voluntaristic Idealism:** Will is the heart of reality; the real is will (vs. Hegel's rational is real).
2. **Personal vs. Hegelian:** Personal is pluralistic (many minds/persons); Hegelian is monistic (one absolute spirit).
3. **Fourfold Root:** Ground/consequent, cause/effect, space/time, motive/action; these are a priori categories creating phenomenal necessity.
4. **Lived Body:** Immediate consciousness of bodily experience and will in action, rather than an objective scientific observation of a body.
5. **Brightman/Evil:** Theistic finitism; God is of limited power and struggles against an irrational "given."
6. **Bradley/Absolute:** Distinguishing God (a manifestation) from the Absolute (the whole) to avoid pantheistic identity.
7. **Royce:** Transitioned the "Absolute Spirit" into the "Spirit of the Community" for the American context.
8. **Negation of Will:** Leads to the state of "nothingness" because the world is a projection of the will.
9. **Monistic vs. Pluralistic Evil:** Monism treats evil as a necessary part of the whole/divine; pluralism struggles with why God (as a person) allows it without an external physical world to provide discipline.
10. **Croce:** Hegelian aesthetic theorist who made Hegelian views on art more accessible.

Part III: Essay Questions

1. **The Shift from Reason to Will:** Compare Hegel's assertion that "the rational is real" with Schopenhauer's voluntaristic claim that "reality is will." How does this shift in the primary lens of the human spirit change the resulting metaphysical system and its view of human existence?
2. **The Problem of Evil in Idealist Thought:** Analyze how different branches of post-Hegelian idealism (specifically monistic Hegelianism and pluralistic

Personal Idealism) account for the existence of purposeless evil. Which system offers a more robust theodicy, and what are the logical consequences of "theistic finitism"?

3. **Schopenhauer's Pessimism and Its Legacy:** Examine Schopenhauer's conclusion that this is the "worst of all possible worlds." Discuss how his view of "endless striving," boredom, and pain influenced later philosophical movements like existentialism and the ethics of suicide.
4. **American Personal Idealism:** Trace the influence of personal idealism through Borden Parker Bowne and Edgar Sheffield Brightman. Why was this philosophy particularly attractive to 20th-century Christian thinkers, and what led to its eventual decline into a "matter of history"?
5. **Phenomena and Noumena in Post-Kantian Thought:** Using Schopenhauer's "fourfold root of sufficient reason," explain the relationship between a priori categories and the world as "representation." How does Schopenhauer's use of Kantian "necessity" contrast with his definition of the "will" as "groundless"?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Absolute, The:** In Hegelian thought, the totality of reality; for F.H. Bradley, the ultimate reality of which God is the highest manifestation.
- **Aesthetic Experience:** For Schopenhauer, a contemplative and representational way to overcome the "worst of all possible worlds" in degree by absorbing oneself in the world as an idea.
- **Fourfold Root of Sufficient Reason:** Schopenhauer's name for the four types of necessity (logical, causal, mathematical, and moral) that the mind imposes on the phenomenal world.
- **Lived Body:** A term in phenomenology referring to the conscious experience of being a body and the immediate awareness of the will's movements, as opposed to the body viewed as an external object.
- **Monistic Idealism:** The belief that all of reality is a single, unified substance or spirit (e.g., Hegel's Absolute Spirit).

- **Neo-Kantianism:** A movement represented in part by Schopenhauer, which returns to Kant's distinction between phenomena (appearances) and noumena (things-in-themselves), focusing on a priori categories.
- **Personal Idealism:** A pluralistic branch of idealism, prominent at USC and Boston University, that views the "person" as the ultimate category of reality and maintains the existence of many individual minds.
- **Pluralistic Idealism:** The metaphysical view that reality consists of many distinct minds or spirits rather than one single Absolute.
- **Theistic Finitism:** The belief—held by Brightman and Bertocci—that God is limited in power, often used as a way to resolve the logical contradiction of the existence of purposeless evil.
- **Voluntaristic Idealism:** A form of idealism that identifies the "will" (rather than reason or feeling) as the fundamental nature of reality.
- **Vorstellung:** A German term used by Hegel and Schopenhauer meaning "representation" or "idea"; for Schopenhauer, the symbolic way the mind talks about the world.