

Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)

Hegel's Life. Georg Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) was born in Stuttgart, in the kingdom of Wuerttemberg, where his father was secretary to the local revenue office. At three he attended the local public school, and proved astonishingly precocious. Two years later when he entered the local Latin School he already knew the first declension, with some help from his mother. By the time he had enrolled in the Stuttgart Gymnasium Illustre he was a voracious reader—not only of Classics but of German authors like Klopstock and Lessing. At the age of eighteen he entered the renowned Tuebinger Stift, the theological faculty at Tuebingen University, where he was lucky to form friendships with fellow students like the poet Friedrich Hoelderlin, and the critic and philosopher Friedrich Schelling, both of whom had significant influence on the development of Hegel. (One of the closest bonds among the three was their shared enthusiasm for the French Revolution, which was in full swing, and which was stirring the spirit of freedom in Germany; and which would in the proximate future foreordain the issue of freedom to central position in the thought of the three friends.) After graduation—he was writing drafts of philosophical essays all the time—Hegel spent several years as a private tutor. In 1801 he went to Jena, where he collaborated with Schelling, while by 1806 we see him completing one of his great books, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Die Phaenomenologie des Geistes*), in which he unfolds the best known principles of the philosophy we now, thanks to him, call absolute idealism. (While completing this work he had occasion to see Napoleon, on horseback, entering Prussia victoriously, and had to admire this victorious figure of history, who would seem to embody key elements of Hegel's historical belief that what happens is right.) In 1818 Hegel was appointed to a Professorship of Philosophy in Berlin, and saw his intellectual reputation spread throughout Europe.

Hegel's and German thought. Theologians and philosophers—from Eckhart to Boehme, Fichte to Schopenhauer—have played fruitful roles in shaping the creative imaginations of German literature. (In fact no other literature than German so turns around the unity of the philosophical with the imaginative.) Throughout his work, in logic, aesthetics, and especially in metaphysics Hegel unfolds a thought scheme in which the Absolute Spirit, Geist, realizes itself, in revolutionary development, into the many stages first of cosmic unfolding then of historical unfolding, from the earliest human presences known to our planet to Hegel's own present, in which he saw—remember his response to the French Revolution—the furthest yet development of the will of what is.

Hegel: Aesthetics and Logic. As the Absolute Spirit reveals itself it inevitably assumes an evolving sequence of phenomenal expressions. (While pure spirit, that is, it can only realize itself by taking on concrete forms.) Pure thought (philosophy), forms of society or government, conceptions that become the laws, norms of behavior (moral values): all these realms of expression enable us to know Geist in its unfolding. Quite as meaningful to us, in our effort to see the advance of Spirit behind us, is the unfolding of Idea as sensuous form that is as art. We are to assume, if we follow Hegel's argument of the 'advance of spirit,' that its expression in concrete form, in the arts, will show itself to be unceasingly 'purer,' and 'more Geist like.' It is a matter of fine distinction, to consider Hegel's efforts to establish this point, and a pleasure to the aesthetic in all of us, to see to what extraordinary insights Hegel takes us, as he conducts us into the development of literature, the plastic arts, and architecture up to his own time. It is only for the sake of minimal completeness, that we must add, that Hegel's dialectical system of logic, by which he characterizes the self-generation of Spirit, is an indispensable correlate of the evolutionary process he tracks in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Reading

Primary source reading

A Hegel Reader, ed. Houlgate, 1998.

Secondary source reading

Houlgate, Stephen, *An Introduction to Hegel. Freedom, Truth, and History*, 2005.

Further reading

Solomon, Robert, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, 1983.

Original language reading

Schaefer, Reiner, *Die dialektik und ihre besonderen Formen in Hegel's Logik*, 2001.

Suggested paper topics

Hegel believes that the arts are expressions of Geist, spirit; incarnations. (This is a one sentence survey of a lifetime of positioning the argument.) Does this general kind of approach, to what the arts and especially literature, are, seem promising to you? Is it an approach which leads to fresh insights into texts of literature?

When Hegel saw the victorious Napoleon riding through Prussia, he was amazed, and despite his feelings about the matter he admired the conqueror. What was it he admired? Was it the spirit of history incarnate, as we are told? If so, what does that incarnation of spirit in history mean to Hegel, and why is it so powerful? Have you had that feeling, in watching an international figure who seems to be riding the wave of history?

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Governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it When liberty is mentioned, we must always be careful to observe whether it is not really the assertion of private interests which is thereby designated.

Mark this well, you proud men of action! you are, after all, nothing but unconscious instruments of the men of thought.

Education is the art of making man ethical.

We do not need to be shoemakers to know if our shoes fit, and just as little have we any need to be professionals to acquire knowledge of matters of universal interest.

An idea is always a generalization, and generalization is a property of thinking. To generalize means to think

Truth in philosophy means that concept and external reality correspond.

The history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom.