

Introduction to Hegel

There are two differing approaches to interpreting Hegel. Both can be spelled out by looking at his rather straightforward definition of philosophy as “its own time raised to the level of spirit” (from the preface of Elements of the Philosophy of Right). This definition begins with our own thinking taken as historically conditioned and “raises” it to the level of “spirit.” As Hegel firmly grounds philosophy in our own particular ideas or consciousness and characterizes its end as “spirit,” his views are clearly idealistic. However, his idealism has been interpreted differently as “absolute” or “critical.”

Consider spirit – in German *geist* - taken as mind. Hegel believes that spirit follows “the pathway of natural consciousness which is pressing forward to true knowledge.” (23). Considering the world as the “object” of knowledge and a “concept” the means by which we come to know the world, Hegel concludes that the “goal .. [is] where knowledge is no longer compelled to go beyond itself, where it finds its own self, and the concept corresponds to the object and the object to the concept.” (24). In other words, there is no distinction between the mind and the world. In this sense, this goal is form of absolute idealism.

The alternative critical idealistic interpretation of Hegel takes him to be following the Kantian issue of the preconditions of our consciousness. This Kantian issue can be appreciated with his Copernican analogy. Copernicus transformed physics by attempting to understand our observations of the stars by hypothesizing that we are traveling around the sun instead of the reverse. In Kant’s “transcendental idealism,” knowledge is not understood as mental representations which merely “corresponds” to a wide range of objects external to us, but rather as circumscribed by the limits of how the “formal” structure of the mind forms mental representations. In this way, it is not our ideas which are formed by the objects we perceive, but rather our minds which determine how objects appear to us. As the above definition of philosophy begins with “its own time,” Hegel is seen, under this interpretation, as extending Kant’s “forms” of perception and cognition to include historically and socially determined “forms” with the aim of understanding all such conditions. This is a form of critical idealism because reality is not identified with, but is rather defined by the conditions of our consciousness.

Hegel has been influential in three diverse philosophical areas. The British idealists of the later 1800’s have developed his absolute idealism as a metaphysical/theological view of God as Absolute Spirit. Existentialist thinkers of the 1900’s have taking the idea of the historical and cultural dependency of thought and individuals from Hegel. Marxists have taken the developmental aspects of Hegel’s views which were minimized above. In the above definition, philosophy is in its own time “raised” to the level of spirit. This process is characterized as a “dialectical” and occurs in an historical and cultural setting. Marxists typically interpreting this process in materialist rather than idealist terms and apply it to “geist” taken as “zeitgeist,” or spirit of the age.

A key aspect of Hegel's epistemology is that he argues that my most immediate (and thereby certain) perceptions of the world presuppose three substantive claims about myself. The first is that every experience contains implicit conceptual presuppositions, e.g. my perception of redness in my vision

field, presupposes that I possess some concept of redness. This makes my experience essentially “mediated.” Nowadays, philosophers make this point by claiming that all experience is theory-laden. Hegel’s second presupposition is that when I perceive something, I also must be self-conscious of myself. In other words, when I perceive anything, e.g., redness, I perceive it as distinct from me. As a result, this act of perception presupposes an awareness of myself as a perceiving subject and as distinct from what I am perceiving. The third presupposition is that my awareness of myself as a perceiving subject requires that I recognize other self-conscious subjects as such and they recognize me as such. This pattern of mutual recognition provides the necessary conditions for which any individual self-consciousness can exist.

Introduction to Phenomenology of Spirit (1807)

Knowledge is either an instrument for gaining access to truth (or absolute reality) or it is a passive medium through which truth reaches us. If it is the former, then the instrument molds and alters it. If it is the latter, then we receive the truth only as it is through and in this medium. The conclusion is a skeptical one that we do not possess or get in touch with truth as it is. In the following paragraph, he counters with a reply that perhaps we can “remove” from our knowledge the “alteration” given by the instrument. He replies that if we were to do this, then the result would be identical to truth before we sought to come to know it, i.e. unknown. Likewise, if we “eliminate” the medium, then we also eliminate knowledge.

But Hegel is not a skeptic. He believes that arguments like the above presuppose that the knowledge is true but that it also stands apart from the absolute (or truth); consequently, knowledge both is and is not the truth. This is a contradiction and he believes that it shows that the distinction between truth and knowledge, which the above skeptical argument presupposes, is false. Ideally, the correct model for knowledge is one in which it is identical with truth. The end result of this will be a version of idealism: the identification of knowledge (or consciousness) with truth or reality.

Hegel Questions:

1. On p. 20, in the second paragraph, Hegel argues for skepticism on the basis of a simple assumption about knowledge: knowledge is either an instrument for gaining knowledge of the world (the absolute) that alters its object or it is a passive medium by which unaltered truth reaches us. In this second alternative, we receive the truth only through this medium and not in itself. He concludes that it is “absurd” to use knowledge to come to know the world. Lay out the details of this argument and analyze what is going on in this brief argument and agree or disagree with Hegel’s conclusion.
2. In the first full paragraph on p. 21, he claims that the above argument “presupposes a distinction between ourselves and this knowledge. The result is that it “presupposes that knowledge [what we possess ourselves], which, by being outside the Absolute, is certainly also outside the truth, is nevertheless true.” In other words, as knowledge is outside of the truth, then it cannot be considered to be true; however, we do wish knowledge to be true. This sounds contradictory. What is Hegel’s argument here? Try to put it in a modus tollens structure and express the conclusion as Hegel’s major claim that the real is identical with the rational.