

FAQ - HEGEL AND POLITICS

[Kai Froeb, Maurizio Canfora](#)



- [1. POLITICS:](#)
 - [1.1. Wasn't Hegel a totalitarian?](#)
 - [1.2. Wasn't Hegel a lackey of the Prussian Monarchy?](#)
 - [1.3. Wasn't Hegel a German nationalist?](#)
 - [1.4. Wasn't Hegel a Nazi?](#)
 - [1.5. Didn't Hegel glorify War?](#)
 - [1.6. Didn't Hegel say that the State is Divine, or even that the State is God?](#)
 - [1.7. Doesn't Hegel's dictum, "Reality is Rational," oblige us to accept War, Atrocity and Injustice?](#)
 - [1.8. Didn't Hegel say that the Master/Slave relationship is the eternal relationship of humanity?](#)
 - [1.9. Didn't Hegel hate Africa and Africans?](#)
 - [1.10. Wasn't Hegel a Euro-centric writer who saw all non-European cultures as inferior or deficient?](#)
 - [1.11. Wasn't Hegel patriarchal and anti-Feminist?](#)
- [2. THEORY](#)
 - [2.1. Didn't Hegel say the modern age is the End of History?](#)
 - [2.2. Isn't Hegel's Absolute the same as 'Logomachy', that is an insane 'battle of thoughts', a pointless and ambitious overestimation of Reason?](#)
 - [2.3. If Hegel was a Metaphysician, doesn't this make him irrelevant for modern times?](#)
 - [2.4. How can some writers justify a Non-metaphysical Hegel?](#)
 - [2.5. Isn't Hegelian philosophy just another belief system for True Believers to hold onto absolutely, and without question?](#)
 - [2.6. Didn't Hegel declare that Art is dead?](#)
 - [2.7. Didn't Hegel see himself, in an obvious megalomania, as the Absolute Spirit?](#)
- [3. LOGIC:](#)
- [4. PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE:](#)
- [5. PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRIT:](#)
 - [6. METHODOLOGY:](#)
 - [6.1. Hegel is famous for being hard to read, so how should a beginner begin?](#)
 - [answers to 6.2 and 6.3 - coming soon](#)
 - [6.4. Some say Hegel used the method of: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and others deny this. Who is correct?](#)
 - [6.5. What are the major writings of Hegel?](#)
 - [6.6. How are Hegel's major writings related to each other?](#)
- [HISTORY:](#)
 - [7.1. Who were the main influences on Hegel's philosophy?](#)
 - [7.2. Who were the main influences on Hegel's theology?](#)
 - [7.3. Do you have a good biography of Hegel?](#)
 - [7.4. Didn't Hegel see the history of Philosophy coming to its conclusion with himself alone?](#)
 - [7.5. How might Hegelians explain Philosophy after Hegel?](#)
- [X. FURTHER QUESTIONS](#)
 - [X.1. Why was Hegel so deeply misunderstood?](#)
 - [X.2 Further reading](#)

1. POLITICS:

1.1. Wasn't Hegel a totalitarian?

No.

"Totalitarianism" is a relatively new concept. It was employed for the first time in the XXth century, mainly to define a form of political organisation where there is the attempt to subordinate the whole behaviour and the consciousness of each single individual and the complexity of an entire society (and its different institutionalised bodies) to a unique principle, which is considered as the "highest" and "purest" value.

Taking into account this definition, it is deeply wrong to define Hegel as a totalitarian.

Firstly, Hegel lived in Germany between the end of the XVIIIth and the beginning of the XIXth century, a time where no totalitarian forms of government existed, therefore it would be anachronistic to project on the philosopher ways of thinking and political experiences which are not proper of his time.

Secondly, it is not even possible to find in Hegel's political philosophy elements which would have influenced yet-to-come totalitarian regimes. A distinctive character of Hegel's Logic, which is also recalled in his political philosophy, is that "the true is the whole". And the "whole", that is the "universal", would not be "universal" if it did not include in itself the "particular". In other terms, no "universal" ideal can be imposed, abstractly, on the "particular", on the complexity and the richness of the many "particulars", because such imposition would contradict the very character of the "universal", making it just another, dangerously dogmatic form of "particular". This means that Hegel - would he have had knowledge of totalitarianism as a form of political thought - would have considered it, as it is, the worst form of obscurantism and dogmatism.

Thirdly, it is not possible to find in Hegel's political philosophy any link to actual and "fulfilled" forms of totalitarianism. For instance, Hegel's "Philosophy of Right" considers family and civil society as crucial moments in the development of every individual. Hegel recognises explicitly all over this work that the "privacy" of the family is sacred, and that the independence of civil society is one of the distinguishing features of modern times. He opposes any attempt at attacking such pillars of society as a whole. That is exactly the opposite of what was attempted in XXth century totalitarian regimes, where civil society was subordinated to the "Party" and family's privacy came under ferocious attack.

Philosophers who have tried to describe Hegel as a totalitarian (such as Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell) simply misread Hegel, did not take the time to understand what he actually had to say, and committed the regrettable mistake to use Hegel's philosophy as a subject of reversed propaganda against Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the aftermath of World War II, with an eye on the coming Cold War. Now that the Cold War is over, it is necessary to reappraise Hegel's political philosophy and definitively abandon such gross and misleading interpretations of it, caused by the ugly "spirit of those times".

1.2. Wasn't Hegel a lackey of the Prussian Monarchy?

No.

First of all, Hegel's description of the rational State in his "Philosophy of Right" (1821) cannot be identified at all with a description of the Prussian Monarchy at the time Hegel was writing. Hegel was describing the kind of State that liberal and progressive Prussian reformers (such as Stein, but particularly Hardenberg and Altenstein) would have liked to establish if they would have been given the possibility by King Frederick William III and his reactionary entourage.

Hegel's political philosophy - with its support for constitutionalism, public parliamentary debate, free elections and a strong civil service - was regarded with suspicion by the Prussian Monarchy, which saw in it a sort of moderate fulfilment of the principles proclaimed by the French Revolution in 1789.

For these reasons, Hegel was rarely invited to Court. The only well-documented episode, regarding a dinner with the Prussian Crown Prince and future King Frederick William IV, witnesses how tense the relations were between Hegel and the Court. During that dinner, the Crown Prince attacked Hegel's friend and foremost disciple, associate professor Eduard Gans, for his liberal ideas, suggesting that Hegel should take direct control over Gans's lectures on "Hegelian philosophy".

Moreover, due to the opposition of a conservative academic milieu and the Court, Hegel never made it through the Royal Academy of Science in Berlin, contrary to the major intellectuals teaching in Prussia.

Bearing all this in mind, the old and often repeated statement that Hegel was the "State Philosopher" in Prussia has to be utterly rejected. Not only was Hegel threatened by the Crown Prince and excluded by a prestigious academic position: his name is also mentioned a lot of times in Police reports of the time, as the one of a person involved in spreading liberal and progressive ideas.

Finally, while Hegel remained a constitutional monarchist until the end of his life, he never attributed excessive importance to the role of the sovereign. During his lessons on the philosophy of right he affirmed that the monarch's power consisted only in saying "yes" and then "dotting the i".

Hegel's preference for Monarchy was based on logical/philosophical convictions: that there must be one representative alone of the "personality" of the State (and this role is attributed, also in modern states, to a monarch or a President of the Republic); and that constitutional and parliamentary Monarchy summarizes in itself all other forms of government (aristocracy and democracy). From this account, it emerges clearly that the kind of Monarchy endorsed by Hegel's political philosophy cannot be identified with autocracy or dictatorship. On the contrary, it can be compared with the "Westminster" system of government, only with a more crucial role assigned to civil service

1.3. Wasn't Hegel a German nationalist?

No.

German nationalism began flourishing after 1807, as a consequence of Prussia's humiliating defeat by Napoleon's army and of the occupation of most of the former German Empire by French troops. Though sympathetic to the idea of a unified Germany, Hegel was never a nationalist. He actually endorsed Napoleon's victory over Prussia (just like Goethe), seeing in it the progress into Germany of the ideas born with the French Revolution.

Soon German nationalism evolved in a form of irrational exaltation of everything "German", and the condemnation of foreign principles (among them, the ones of the French Revolution). The foremost supporters of this exalted form of nationalism were Fries and Schleiermacher. Both of them were bitter academic adversaries of Hegel, who never embraced this kind of nationalism and remained sceptical towards any reactionary glorification of "typically German" traditions. Also in Berlin, Hegel remained sympathetic to France (during a trip to Paris, he wrote to his wife that he had arrived in the "capital of the civilised world").

Hegel was actually accused by German nationalists for being "unpatriotic". This accusation can be found in different authors, such as Rudolf Haym and Heinrich Treitschke.

Finally, it has to be noted that (contrary to widespread prejudice) Hegel never declared that History would have culminated in Germany. The fact that his lectures on the philosophy of history end with a section entitled "The Germanic World" has given rise to some (guilty) misunderstanding. In German, the proper title is "Die germanische Welt", where the adjective "germanisch" does not at all refer to the word "German", the inhabitant of Germany (which, in Goethe's language, actually sounds "Deutsch"). "Germanic" refers on the contrary to the peoples who invaded the Roman Empire in the fourth/fifth century AD: from those tribes *all* European nations (i.e. French, Germans, Italians, Spaniards, Russians, etc.) derive.

1.4. Wasn't Hegel a Nazi?

No.

Nazi ideology is based on two key concepts: the subdivision of world's inhabitants into a hierarchy of biological races (and, as a consequence, anthropological nominalism); an irrational exaltation of force, action and violence on reason, thought and law and order. Both principles are utterly incompatible with Hegel's political philosophy.

Hegel's main concept, "Spirit", cannot in any case be identified with the one of "race". Already in the "Phenomenology" Hegel heavily criticizes pseudo-scientific doctrines which claim to be able to explain human behaviour through "exterior and accidental" details such as the form of the head or the characteristics of the body.

According to Hegel, one of the major conquests of Christianity (and then of the French Revolution) was the discovery of the concept of "human being" as such. In his "Philosophy of Right" (1821), he claims that it is no longer important whether one is called French, German, Jew or Italian, because these characterisations are sublated in the very concept of "human being".

Moreover, Hegel is a staunch supporter of law, codification and rationality against "tradition" and "feeling". In his "Philosophy of Right" he declares that the respect for the codified law is the "shibboleth" distinguishing the true philosopher from the dangerous fanaticist.

Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that Hegel's philosophy was explicitly rejected by Adolf Hitler in his Table Talks of 1940.

1.5. Didn't Hegel glorify War?

No.

Nowhere in Hegel's philosophy can we trace a glorification of war as such. Hegel deals with war as an undeniable "fact" that characterise human history and reality; instead of simply dismissing this phenomenon as "evil", he tries to explain it and to incorporate it in his conception of the "universal". The major feature of Hegel's philosophy in general is *movement*. War, for all its tragical consequences and its sufferances (and Hegel describes them without any kind of romantic pathos or exaltation, but just for how terrible they are), brings movement to history and sometimes allows the progress in the consciousness of freedom.

Let's take the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, for instance: instead of simply condemning these events as violent expression of human rage, Hegel locates them in their own context, acknowledges the role violence has played in these events and the fact that without violence the principles of the French Revolution wouldn't have spread. Let's not forget that "Perpetual Peace" was not only a concept brought forward by the Abbot of Saint-Pierre and Kant; it was also the self-confessed ideal that inspired the 'Holy Alliance'. Eternal stability benefits the privileged with respect to the underprivileged.

Finally, it would be a gross mistake to project back on Hegel our own experience with contemporary wars. When writing in the early XIXth century, Hegel was not aware of the destructive potential of modern weapons. It is obvious, but it has to be repeated: during Hegel's lifetime, war was violent, of course, but was also very different. Civilians were rarely involved in direct attacks; the powers at war always envisaged the possibility of peace. There were no weapons capable of destroying entire nations and endanger the very survival of human life on Earth.

1.6. Didn't Hegel say that the State is Divine, or even that the State is God?

No.

There is a famous sentence in Hegel's Lectures on the Philosophy of History that has been badly translated into English, so that it fits with the old prejudice that Hegel identified the State with God. The bad translation is: "The State is the march of God through history". The actual correct translation, corresponding to the German text, is: "That the State exists, is like the march of God through history". From the surrounding text, it is clear that Hegel is not affirming that the State *is* God. He is just using a theological metaphor to explain that the State represents the incarnation of human freedom in a set of institutions, just like Christ represent the incarnation of God in our human history.

It is true that Hegel attributes to the State an important function in his political philosophy. He considers the State to be the highest incarnation of the "objective spirit", the highest form of institutionalised freedom ever reached by man. It is important to note that Hegel considers a State to be rational, insofar it is also free: the more a particular State is free, the more it is closer to the concept of State itself.

The fact that State is so important to Hegel does not diminish the crucial function of the previous moments of the objective spirit, i.e. family and civil society. Hegel never proposes to "swallow" and annihilate them in the State. The existence of civil society as such is an essential feature of modern times. As far as international politics is concerned, Hegel was well aware that any given State was limited by its self-interests, and that those interests were at odds with those of other nations.

Finally, Hegel's system cannot be reduced to the section of the "objective spirit". There is a higher reality than the one represented by the State, and it is constituted by the three moments of the "absolute spirit": Art, Religion and Philosophy. While creating the material conditions that enable artists, theologians and philosophers to operate, the State can't impose itself on these crucial aspects of the freedom of consciousness.

1.7. Doesn't Hegel's dictum, "Reality is Rational," oblige us to accept War, Atrocity and Injustice?

No.

Hegel's dictum actually reads: "What is rational is actual, what is actual is rational". It is important to notice the succession of moments in this famous sentence: first comes "the rational is actual", then comes "the actual is rational".

A correct interpretation of the dictum relies on the correct understanding of the word "actual". As Hegel himself explained, "actuality" does not correspond to mere existence. "Actual" is what has to happen, because of the implications already contained in itself. In other terms - to take an example - in a situation where an underprivileged class is blatantly exploited by a privileged one, there are already the germs of revolt and violent change. That revolt is then "actual". The contingent and terrible consequences of exploitation and revolt (such as death, injustice, revenge) accompany the realisation of the actual, but are not "actual" themselves. They are awful "accidents".

According to Hegel, what is "rational", i.e. what corresponds to the progress in the consciousness of freedom, *must* happen, because rationality - according to the lesson taught by the old ontological argument - presupposes its own existence. Therefore, what is rational is also actual in the sense explained above. As a consequence, the reverse is also correct: what is actual is rational, i.e. it corresponds to the progress in the consciousness of freedom.

It is important to realise that this result is not always cautioned in Hegel's philosophy, nor history is a "straightforward march to the Reign of the Free". Hegel's philosophy does not make forecast for the future: as Hegel said, philosophy arrives too late. While Hegel's vantage point is that the consciousness of freedom will ultimately progress, this is not an assured result, but it is the result of history as such: and history is not only made of "actual" events, but also of "contingent" elements, whose strength has to be measured.

Therefore, to come back to the main question, the concept of the “actuality of the rational” only explains that what we see around us is not the irrational result of a plot or of violence and brute force; instead, it is the result of the becoming rational of the actual. Hence the rationality of the actual prompts us to fight against injustice and oppression, which are the irrational components of human history.

1.8. Didn't Hegel say that the Master/Slave relationship is the eternal relationship of humanity?

No.

The Master/Slave relationship occupies a relevant, yet not so crucial as sometimes implied, section within Hegel's “Phenomenology of Spirit”. Some authors, particularly in France (where they were expression of different trends of existentialism), attempted at making this relationship the core issue within Hegel's philosophy, and one who would have later inspired Marx and his concept of class warfare.

What it is important in Hegel's description of the Master/Slave relationship is first of all the concept of “struggle for recognition”. The very beginning of the Master/Slave relationship is caused by one of the parties of this struggle for recognition giving up his fight for fear of the death. Therefore the winner of this struggle gets his recognition by the loser, who can only survive as a Slave to his new Master.

The second important point of this relationship is that, according to Hegel, it is unstable and destined to be overcome.

From the vantage point of the Master, it is quickly understood that his own essence of “Master” depends on the goodwill of the Slave: insofar the Slave is afraid to die to defend himself and his freedom, the Master will remain so. At the same time, it is the hard work of the Slave who actually allows the Master to remain strong and enjoy the comfort of his life. It has to be questioned whether this was the kind of recognition the Master was fighting for in the first place.

From the vantage point of the Slave, the consciousness of being essential to the Master quickly advances; through his labour, the Slave understands that he can modify and interpret reality, giving his own contribution to the world through his creations. He gradually recognises that he has a point of view on the world and that this point of view heavily conditions the Master's own life.

Therefore, the Master/Slave relationship is destined to collapse, as soon as the Slave recognises that he deserves to be free. This is one of the reasons why Hegel condemned enslavement all along his life. According to our philosopher, the Master/Slave relationship is not “eternal”, nor is it the main feature of human life.

1.9. Didn't Hegel hate Africa and Africans?

No.

Hegel harshly criticized Africa in 1830 because of his strong opposition to enslavement. Hegel made efforts to keep himself informed on the situation in Africa. According to his sources (not always the most informed) in 1830 the entire Africa was characterized by the Master/Slave relationship in every quarter of its national existence. Hegel saw in Africa a society where the concept of “State”, as a form of incarnation of human freedom in a set of institutions, had not yet appeared.

Hegel's treatment of Africa had nothing to do with race. He had recognized that all other nations in the world were also, at one time or other, completely overwhelmed by the Master/Slave relationship, and race had nothing to do with it. Hegel also recognized that other nations had only partially overcome their internal Master/Slave relationship, so this was always a matter of degree. Hence, in Hegel's theory, Africa was like every other nation insofar as it always had the potential to overcome its internal Master/Slave relationships.

It is possible to criticise Hegel's lack of information on other aspects of African culture, but it is very difficult to argue that his position was based on a biased form of racism or intolerance. “Race” is never mentioned by Hegel as a relevant element in his appreciation of reality. Quite the opposite, Hegel rejected and condemned explanations of human behaviour based on the external appearance of the body (as he did in his “Phenomenology” as regards pseudo-sciences such as phrenology and physiognomics).

1.10. Wasn't Hegel a Euro-centric writer who saw all non-European cultures as inferior or deficient?

No.

Hegel was a “Freedom-centric” writer who would prefer any nation in the world that demonstrated a greater degree of Freedom than the others. Hegel did believe that Europe after the French Revolution had reached, compared with other nations, a higher degree in the consciousness of Freedom than Africa, Central Asia, East Asia and America.

Hegel's conviction was based on a deep and thorough study of all available sources in XIXth century Prussia. It is of course possible to criticise those sources and therefore imply that they were biased and Euro-centric. That was certainly not Hegel's fault.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Hegel's philosophy of history was in his own time and context a scientific attempt to analyse the existing world and his historical development. Being a scientific work, it is possible that some of its conclusions need to be reviewed and corrected, just as Hegel himself would have done (and did, semester after semester, always updating his knowledge to the latest sources available).

1.11. Wasn't Hegel patriarchal and anti-Feminist?

No.

Hegel probably read Feminist literature, including the little-known writer, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1792) who wrote within the orbit of Condorcet and the Paine-Godwin-Wollstonecraft circle. Hippel's book, "On improving the Status of Women" is perhaps the high point in XVIIIth century Prussian feminism. Hippel starts his work by declaring bluntly that "men and women are equal", an assumption that not many intellectuals, even though with feminist sympathies, would have dared make in the late 1700s.

It has been convincingly suggested - through a deep comparison of both works - that some parts of Hegel's treatment of family in his "Philosophy of Right" (1821) are indebted to the principles contained in Hippel's book on the status of women. Among the major points of contact, it is possible to mention the fact that Hegel treats women and men as equal property holders within the family and also outside it, in civil society, so that women remain autonomous and independent citizens even in the case they are not married.

Similarly to the one of "race", the concept of "gender" never played an important role in Hegel's philosophy. Hegel's description of the differences between the "male" principle and the "female" principle must be taken as external description of what he considered, as a child of his time, to be a realistic approach to reality. But though Hegel's position on differences in character between genders is odd, yet rather typical of his own time (see Rousseau's "Emile"), it is possible to acknowledge that his treatment of family law is quite advanced as far as the position of women and children is concerned.

2. THEORY

2.1. Didn't Hegel say the modern age is the End of History?

No.

In his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel never actually mentions the "end" of history. On the contrary, he affirms that "the length of time is something entirely relative, and the element of spirit is eternity. Duration [...] cannot be said to belong to it"; this is an evident and clear argument against any hypothesis of an interruption (a stop, an "end") of the eternal movement of the spirit.

For this reason, as expected, Hegel makes often reference in his lectures to the possibility of a further evolution in history.

This is the case, famously, for Hegel's judgment on the development of parliamentarism, where he considers the functioning of modern parliaments (in France) and he observes that the problems arising from it "are that with which history is now occupied, and whose solution it has to work out *in the future*" (emphasis added). Moreover, in the Introduction of his lectures, contravening to his usual restraint from formulating predictions, Hegel defined America and Russia as "lands of the future". Similarly, in a contemporary letter to an Estonian student and admirer, Baron Boris von Üxküll, he repeated the same consideration with reference to Russia alone.

The concept of the End of History needs to be interpreted, truly to the authentic Hegelian tradition, in the sense of a Goal of History. According to Hegel, his way of analysing history differs from the traditional treatments of this subject. His history is "philosophical", in the sense that it has to be interpreted as the attempt by the philosopher to read the development of human spirit *rationaly*, finding what in it is to be defined "actual" and therefore corresponds to the progress in the consciousness of freedom. The Goal of History, in this sense, is the complete overcoming of the Master/Slave relationship in human affairs. Hegel already knew that this Goal is a long way away.

The concept that History has actually "stopped" is not to be found in Hegel, but in one of XXth-century foremost interpreters of Hegel, Alexandre Kojève. An exponent of French Hegelianism in the 1930s, Kojève interpreted Hegel in such a way that he considered the "struggle for recognition" as a crucial part within Hegel's system, identifying this struggle with history itself. According to Kojève, the struggle for recognition ended through the spreading of the values of the French Revolution with the victory of Napoleon in Jena, in 1806. Subsequently, history stopped, and we entered a "post-historical" age, where human be-

ings act as satisfied animals, with no more impulse for action. More recently, Kojève's American disciple Francis Fukuyama wrote that our capitalistic society, victorious over Communism thanks to the collapse of the USSR, constitutes the End of History.

Both thinkers merely used Hegel's philosophy as an inspiration for their postmodern conclusions, profoundly distorting the meaning of Hegel's original ideas.

2.2. Isn't Hegel's Absolute the same as 'Logomachy', that is an insane 'battle of thoughts', a pointless and ambitious overestimation of Reason?

No.

According to Hegel, Reason - to be *reason* - is by definition reasonable. The abuse of Reason is clearly no longer Reason. The charges of 'Logomachy' (and, similarly, 'Panlogism') come from generations of Kantians and Neo-Kantians who struggle to come to terms with Hegel's challenge to their mentor, Kant. Hegel made a revolution in Reason by challenging Kant's hypothesis of the Unknowable Thing-in-itself, following the attacks on critical philosophy already attempted by Jacobi, Fichte and Schelling.

Hegel is unconvinced by the traditional explanations on how knowledge takes place. He criticizes and rejects the epistemological theories based on the absolute separation between a knowing subject and a known object. For Hegel, 'subject' and 'object' are the dialectical moments of a deeper unity, the (dialectical) unity of Thought and Being (and, from the practical vantage point, of normative and affirmative propositions). Reason is not so powerless that it cannot know itself, that it cannot realise itself in the world. Therefore, the hypothesis of an Unknowable Thing-in-itself constitutes an arbitrary limitation of the possibilities of Reason.

Hegel's argument fights both the Kantian and the irrationalist trend in philosophy, charging them of inconsistency. Those who advocate Kantianism should end up upholding scepticism, unless they contradict themselves by declaring that they are sure of the existence of a Thing-in-itself. Those who advocate Irrationalism contradict themselves, since they argue (using reason) that we should devalue reason.

Hegel's dialectical logic is the way through the contradictions of scepticism and irrationalism are solved. Kantians and Irrationalists have often accused Hegel of overestimating Reason: however, these charges do not include a formal critique of Hegel's dialectical logic, and remain unsubstantiated.

2.3. If Hegel was a Metaphysician, doesn't this make him irrelevant for modern times?

No.

The concept of Metaphysics has assumed different meanings during the ages, and particularly with the positivistic trend in philosophy it has become synonymous with "unscientific conception" of the world. The development of a criticism of Metaphysics in this latter sense is to be found, firstly, in Galileo, when he contends that science must base itself on free observation and not on the excessive reliance on "authorities".

A second blow was hit by Hume's critique of the concept of causality, which prompted an emergency answer by Kant. Kant's philosophy reinstated the category of causality, together with the remaining categories, but limited their scope to the knowledge of a world of phenomena, denying that man could know reality as it *really* is. Kant defined as old "Metaphysics" any philosophy that attempted to break the limits of knowledge, by declaring the knowability of the Thing-in-itself.

According to this Kantian definition, Hegel's philosophy can be defined as "Metaphysics", in the sense that it proudly claim that the Thing-in-itself is knowable (and therefore ceases to be a "thing-in-itself").

Paradoxically, however, Hegel would have defined Kantian philosophy itself as a form of "abstract metaphysics", because of Kant's attempt at arbitrarily limiting Reason's capabilities. Hegel considered his own philosophy as 'science', and he insists on upholding his philosophy on rationalism.

Therefore, if Hegel is to be considered a "Metaphysician", he is one in a limited Kantian sense; his philosophy is the heir of ancient Metaphysics, but it is no longer a form of naive reliance on undemonstrated categories: rather the opposite. Hegel's dialectical logic, contrary to Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" deals with the self-foundation of categories. The challenge Hegel's new "Metaphysics" poses to postmodernism is still intact and the condemnation of Hegel's rationalism remains unaccounted for.

2.4. How can some writers justify a Non-metaphysical Hegel?

This is possible, since these writers give a different meaning to “Metaphysics” than the one used by Kant and Kantians. As mentioned, Hegel’s philosophy can be considered is a new, proud and self-conscious form of “Metaphysics” only if we use this term in its Kantian context. If we abandon Kantian definitions, Hegel’s philosophy is - in Hegelian terms - the highest of “sciences”.

Therefore it is understandable that some of the most philosophically committed Marxists returned to Hegel to explain Marx’s analysis of reality, finding deep similarities in the way both Hegel and Marx accounted for the world around them. Obviously, this does not mean that there were no differences between their two philosophies.

2.5. Isn’t Hegelian philosophy just another belief system for True Believers to hold onto absolutely, and without question?

No.

Hegel’s philosophy is the philosophy of Reason, and Hegel himself presents his philosophy as a Science. There cannot be a system of thought less close to a “belief system” than the one of Hegel.

If for “belief system” one means a form of reliance on an external, unchanging and eternal Truth, whose motto may be summarised as “credo quia absurdum est”, then Hegel’s philosophy offers thousands of proofs of its firm opposition to this sort of irrational fideism. According to Hegel, “the true is the whole” - Truth does not assume the shape of an incorruptible dogma, but it incorporates in itself the negativity of movement, instability, contradiction and change. This is the kernel of Hegel’s dialectical logic. Hegel’s system of thought limits the role of philosophy to the understanding of the present situation and rejects any possibility of predicting the future. It is an “open” system of thought.

If for “belief system” one means the naive reliance on man’s immediate ability to interpret reality (for instance through sense-certainty or perception), it is clear that Hegel’s philosophy does not offer such form of false security. Hegel’s “Phenomenology of the Spirit” presents the odyssey of consciousness through different stages of evolution towards knowledge. A complex series of successive “belief systems” is demanteled, the basis for any of those beliefs is shattered. Hegel’s “Phenomenology” can be defined as “the Golgotha of the True Believer”.

2.6. Didn’t Hegel declare that Art is dead?

Not precisely.

Hegel declared that Art, to be Art, must be Free. The main content of Art is Freedom.

However, the economic conditions of the modern age put considerable pressure on artists compared with ancient, medieval and Renaissance times when artists were supported very well. In modern times artists must support themselves, and this obliges many artists to succumb to economic pressures and commercialism. This is the death of the Freedom of Art.

At the same times, particularly in the classical period and at the time of the Greeks, Art represented a recognised form of knowledge and interpretation of reality. The consciousness of freedom has progressed ever since, and in modern times Spirit has found more appropriate ways to interpret itself, among which Philosophy. Nobody in modern times would give credit to Art only as an exclusive means to explain, in a detailed way, essential features of our reality (such as, for instance, the arm-race or the emerging of international terrorism).

For both reasons, in this sense, Art is suppressed considerably in the modern era. It is “dead”, in the sense that it is no longer able to be the major vehicle of human knowledge. It will continue to live and evolve, but it is destined to be confined to a well delimited space, in prey of commercialism and other pressures which will considerably limit its freedom.

2.7. Didn’t Hegel see himself, in an obvious megalomania, as the Absolute Spirit?

No.

Hegel actually saw himself as a Lutheran and never assumed that he was the Absolute Spirit.

According to Hegel, no individual can identify itself with the “Absolute Spirit”; however, faithful to his consideration that the “universal”, to be truly *universal*, must include in itself the complexity of the “particular”, Hegel considered that each individual was part of the Absolute Spirit, and that the Absolute Spirit actually knows itself, and it is self-conscious, through the activity of the individuals.

For this reason, Hegel was fond of quoting Meister Eckhardt's famous dictum: 'The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me'.

3. LOGIC:

coming soon

4. PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE:

coming soon

5. PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRIT:

coming soon

6. METHODOLOGY:

6.1. Hegel is famous for being hard to read, so how should a beginner begin?

As even great secondary literature on Hegel often includes some problematic parts (and by far the most part of the Hegel related secondary literature introduces more problems to the reader than it helps to solve), it is highly recommended that you do not rely on such literature but read Hegel himself. This will also help you to better judge the secondary literature (including our own work at Hegel.Net).

To start reading Hegel proper, the beginner should approach the easiest of Hegel's writings, his LECTURES. Hegel provides lectures on history, philosophy, religion, art and political science. The beginner should begin with a survey – start with the Introductory lectures first. This will prepare the beginner to approach the major writings of Hegel.

A more detailed overview of what to read as a beginner of the wide primary and secondary Hegel literature can be found in the [recommended reading page](#) of our [Hegel works section](#) at Hegel.Net.

answers to 6.2 and 6.3 - coming soon

6.4. Some say Hegel used the method of: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, and others deny this. Who is correct?

The most vexing and devastating Hegel legend is that everything is thought in "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." [...] The actual texts of Hegel not only occasionally deviate from "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis," but show nothing of the sort. "Dialectic" does not for Hegel mean "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." Dialectic means that any "ism" - which has a polar opposite, or is a special viewpoint leaving "the rest" to itself - must be criticized by the logic of philosophical thought, whose problem is reality as such, the "World-itself."

Hermann Glockner's reliable Hegel Lexikon (4 volumes, Stuttgart, 1935) does not list the Fichtean terms "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" together. In all the twenty volumes of Hegel's "complete works" he does not use this "triad" once; nor does it occur in the eight volumes of Hegel texts, published for the first time in the twentieth Century. He refers to "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" in the Preface of the Phenomenology of Mind, where he considers the possibility of this "triplicity" as a method or logic of philosophy. According to the Hegel-legend one would expect Hegel to recommend this "triplicity." But, after saying that it was derived from Kant, he calls it a "lifeless schema," "mere shadow" and concludes: "The trick of wisdom of that sort is as quickly acquired as it is easy to practice. Its repetition, when once it is familiar, becomes as boring as the repetition of any bit of sleigh-of-hand once we see through it. The instrument for producing this monotonous formalism is no more difficult to handle than the palette of a painter, on which lie only two colours .." (Preface, Werke, II, 48-49).

In the student notes, edited and published as History of Philosophy, Hegel mentions in the Kant chapter, the "spiritless scheme of the triplicity of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis" (geistloses Schema) by which the rhythm and movement of philosophic knowledge is artificially pre-scribed (vorgezeichnet).

In the first important book about Hegel by his student, intimate friend and first biographer, Karl Rosenkranz (Hegels Leben, 1844), "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" are conspicuous by their absence. It seems Hegel was quite successful in hiding his alleged "method" from one of his best students.

The very important new Hegel literature of this century has altogether abandoned the legend. Theodor Haering's *Hegels Wollen und Werk* (2 vol., Teubner, 1929 and 1938) makes a careful study of Hegel's terminology and language and finds not a trace of "thesis, antithesis, synthesis." In the second volume there are a few lines (pp. 118, 126) in which he repeats what Hegel in the above quotation had said himself, i.e., that this "conventional slogan" is particularly unfortunate because it impedes the understanding of Hegelian texts. As long as readers think that they have to find "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" in Hegel they must find him obscure - but what is obscure is not Hegel but their coloured glasses. Iwan Iljin's *Hegel's Philosophie als kontemplative Gotteslehre* (Bern, 1946) dismisses the "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" legend in the Preface as a childish game (*Spielerei*), which does not even reach the front-porch of Hegel's philosophy.

Other significant works, like Hermann Glockner, *Hegel* (2 vols., Stuttgart, 1929), Theodor Steinbüchel, *Das Grundproblem der Hegelschen Philosophie* (Bonn, 1933), and Theodor Litt, *Hegel: Eine Kritische Erneuerung* (Heidelberg, 1953), Emerich Coreth, S.J., *Das Dialektische Sein in Hegels Logik* (Wien, 1952), and many others have simply disregarded the legend. In my own monographs on *Hegel über Offenbarung, Kirche und Philosophie* (Munich, 1939) and *Hegel über Sittlichkeit und Geschichte* (Reinhardt, 1940), I never found any "thesis, antithesis, synthesis." Richard Kroner, in his introduction to the English edition of selections from Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*, puts it mildly when he says: "This new Logic is of necessity as dialectical as the movement of thinking itself. .. But it is by no means the mere application of a monotonous trick that could be learned and repeated. It is not the mere imposition of an ever recurring pattern. It may appear so in the mind of some historians who catalogue the living trend of thought, but in reality it is ever changing, ever growing development; Hegel is nowhere pedantic in pressing concepts into a ready-made mold. The theme of thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis, like the motif of a musical composition, has many modulations and modifications. It is never 'applied'; it is itself only a poor and not even helpful abstraction of what is really going on in Hegel's Logic."

Well, shall we keep this "poor and not helpful abstraction" in our attic because "some historians" have used it as their rocking-horse? We rather agree with the conclusion of Johannes Flügge: "Dialectic is not the scheme of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis imputed to Hegel."

In an essay by Nicolai Hartmann on *Aristoteles und Hegel*, I find the following additional confirmation of all the other witnesses to the misinterpretation of Hegel's dialectic: "It is a basically perverse opinion (*grundverkehrte Ansicht*) which sees the essence of dialectic in the triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." The legend was spread by Karl Marx whose interpretation of Hegel is distorted. It is Marxism superimposed on Hegel. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis, Marx says in *Das Elend der Philosophie*, is Hegel's purely logical formula for the movement of pure reason, and the whole system is engendered by this dialectical movement of thesis, antithesis, synthesis of all categories. This pure reason, he continues, is Mr. Hegel's own reason, and history becomes the history of his own philosophy, whereas in reality, thesis, antithesis, synthesis are the categories of economic movements. (Summary of Chapter II, Paragraph 1.) The few passages in Marx' writings that resemble philosophy are not his own. He practices the communistic habit of expropriation without compensation. Knowing this in general, I was also convinced that there must be a source for this "thesis, antithesis, and synthesis," and I finally discovered it.

In the winter of 1835-36, a group of Kantians in Dresden called on Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus, professor of philosophy at the University of Kiel, to lecture to them on the new philosophical movement after Kant. They were older, professional men who in their youth had been Kantians, and now wanted an orientation in a development which they distrusted; but they also wanted a confirmation of their own Kantianism. Professor Chalybäus did just those two things. His lectures appeared in 1837 under the title *Historische Entwicklung der speculativen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel, Zu näherer Verständigung des wissenschaftlichen Publikums mit der neuesten Schule*. The book was very popular and appeared in three editions. In my copy of the third edition of 1843, Professor Chalybäus says (p. 354): "This is the first trilogy: the unity of Being, Nothing and Becoming .. we have in this first methodical thesis, antithesis, and synthesis .. an example or schema for all that follows." This was for Chalybäus a brilliant hunch which he had not used previously and did not pursue afterwards in any way at all. But Karl Marx was at, that time a student at the university of Berlin and a member of the Hegel Club where the famous book was discussed. He took the hunch and spread into a deadly, abstract machinery. Other left Hegelians, such as Arnold Ruge, Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Stirner use "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" just as little as Hegel

(quote from the article of Gustav E. Mueller: *The Hegel Legend of "Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis"*, in "Journal of the History of Ideas", Volume XIX, June 1958, Number 3, Page 411. The article is still as valid today as it was in 1958)

6.5. What are the major writings of Hegel?

While most of Hegel's influence came from his lectures, compiled into books by his disciples after Hegel's death, these are the major books Hegel wrote and published himself during his lifetime:

- PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT (1807)
- SCIENCE OF LOGIC (1st vol.1812, 2nd vol.1813, 3rd vol.1816)
- PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT (1821)
- ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCES (1st Ed. 1817, 2nd Ed. 1827, 3rd Ed.1830)

6.6. How are Hegel's major writings related to each other?

All of Hegel's writings are summarized in his ENCYCLOPEDIA. The Logic is the first part. Natural science is the second part. The Philosophy of Spirit is the third part, including the philosophy of subjective spirit, Rights, History, Art and Religion.

HISTORY:

7.1. Who were the main influences on Hegel's philosophy?

These can be found in [our Hegel biography](#).

Main authors which had a substantial influence on Hegel include the greek tragedians, Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Lessing, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Hölderlin, Fichte and Schelling. In the field of "objective spirit", you would also add the French and British authors on politics and political economy.

7.2. Who were the main influences on Hegel's theology?

Hegel comes from the school of theological rationalism. Rousseau, Lessing, Kant, Hermann Reimarus, Johann Herder and Heinrich Paulus had already constructed a literature that attempted to explain all the miracles of the Bible in rational terms. Hegel begins his theology with their literature. He also is influenced, however, by the older work of Luther, Boehme and Eckhardt. The work of the early church fathers and the medieval scholastic seems to have been much lesser in his focus. (see: Walter Jäschke: "Die Vernunft in der Religion", Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1986, ISBN 3-7728-1188-4 and Hans Küng: "Menschwerdung Gottes", Karl Barth: "Die protestantische Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts", Albert Schweitzer: "Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung")

Hegel was one of the first to also include the non Christian religions in his theological reasoning, and out of his contemporaries, he excels as the one with the widest and deepest interests and knowledge of these other religions. For these non Christian religions of his time, Hegel mainly relied on the reports of explorers and Christian missionaries and the emerging translations of holy texts of these religions. (See: Reinhold Lenze: "Die außerchristlichen Religionen bei Hegel", Vandenhöck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1975, ISBN 3-525-87468-5)

7.3. Do you have a good biography of Hegel?

Yes, go to this URL: <http://www.hegel.net/en/hegelbio.htm>. At the end, it also contains [links to further biographies in the internet](#).

In print, the best English biography is Terry Pinkard: "HEGEL - a biography", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000. The most recent German biography is Horst Althaus "Hegel und Die heroischen Jahre der Philosophie", Carl Hanser Verlag, München Wien 1992. The oldest biography of Hegel (and in some regards still the best) is from Karl Rosenkranz: "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegels Leben" (now available as a paperback at Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ISBN 3-534-13817-1).

For your own studies, the most recommended sources are Hegel's letters (in 4 volumes, where volume 4 consists of 2 subvolumes, including documents on Hegel's life and an index with some short bio data of more than 2,000 people mentioned in Hegel's letters) and "Hegel in Berichten seiner Zeitgenossen" (Hegel in reports of his contemporaries), both published by Meiner Verlag, Hamburg. I heard that at least the letters have been translated into English meanwhile. At least 90% of every Hegel biography is composed of the material found in these last three sources. Walter Kaufmann's famous book "Hegel - a reinterpretation", contains a useful and entertaining collection of highlights out of these letters and reports.

7.4. Didn't Hegel see the history of Philosophy coming to its conclusion with himself alone?

No.

Hegel saw Philosophy as continually growing and developing. He saw himself as the height of Philosophy in 1830, but he expected Philosophy to grow after him. However, he was clear that no Philosophy would be able to completely surpass him until it had first mastered his ideas. (See also: [2.1. Didn't Hegel say the modern age is the End of History?](#) and the [answer to the next question](#))

7.5. How might Hegelians explain Philosophy after Hegel?

This is hotly debated.

- First, people often imply that a newer philosophy is automatically a better philosophy, rightly surpassing the older ones. People sometimes even mistakenly believe that Hegel himself taught this. However, Hegel's 'Lectures on the History

ry of Philosophy' are full of examples where newer Philosophies are not superior to older ones. For example, the whole medieval Philosophers are seen by Hegel as inferior compared to the ancient giants Plato and Aristotle and therefore are little read by him and little given attention in his lectures. A newer Philosopher might enter in a dialogue with the former philosophers and introduce new material not handled by former philosophers, and insofar he is contributing to the advancement of human spirit. However, that does not guarantee that he has understood the older philosophers completely and so an advancement in a particular area (e.g. in understanding of the Christian Religion in the case of the Medieval Philosophers) might be accompanied with important retreats in several other areas until a new giant genius comes to sublimate both the achievements of the former big syntheses with the new material covered by the new philosophies in between. (Vittorio Hösle has written a complete book on this process: "Wahrheit und Geschichte", Frommann-Holzboog Verlag, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1984). In order to do so, modern Philosophy has to discover the Hegelian synthesis to see what they are missing. An uprising of such an awareness that Hegel may offer important insights deeply lacking in (and so very useful for current philosophy) can indeed be observed in current Philosophy.

- Hegelians, on the other side, are challenged to learn and incorporate post Hegelian Philosophy. Judging our question by the aims of Hegelian Philosophy, a central insight of Hegel's Philosophy is "The truth is the whole", so a philosophy after Hegel's death, not included in his philosophy, challenges the Hegelians to include its principles in Hegel's Philosophy in order to further represent the full truth of our time (see our [mission statement](#)). However, this does not automatically concern every philosophy emerging after Hegel's death, as a remarkable number of such principles found in post Hegelian Philosophies are already in more or less greater parts included in Hegel's Philosophy.

Of course, some non-or anti Hegelian Philosophy also came into being not out of necessity but for "external reasons", either because of the ignorance of the newer philosophers, who did no longer read or understood Hegel, or because of political reasons, where especially Hegel's central emphasis upon the struggle for the development of universal freedom was not welcome to some.

X. FURTHER QUESTIONS

X.1. Why was Hegel so deeply misunderstood?

There are several reasons.

A. First of all, Hegel's language is very difficult, and as a consequence very difficult to translate. The reasons for this overall obscurity are numerous: firstly, Hegel uses (translating them into German) technical terms derived from traditional Wolffian metaphysics and Kantian critical philosophy, as reworked by less well-known figures of German idealism (such as Reinhold, Jacobi and Hamann). These technical terms, while known to Hegel's contemporary because used commonly in the philosophical texts, are no longer widespread. A work like Michael Inwood's "Hegel Dictionary" can be of much help here.

Also, the philological Hegel research has made tremendous advances in the last 30 years. In the English speaking world even reliable translations of Hegel's major works have been missing for long time (see Walter Kaufmann's "Hegel - a reinterpretation" for an overview), a situation that became better only over the last 15 years.

Secondly, Hegel's speculative philosophy does not apply the same rules used in classical, formal logic. Therefore Hegel tries to formulate the words and the ordinary structure of each sentence, so that it is able to better fit the context of speculative, dialectic philosophy.

Finally, Hegel's own style is difficult, and clarity was never one of his best attributes, whether in public or in the lecture hall.

The difficulty of Hegel's language formulations caused misunderstandings and discouraged less motivated scholars to actually read Hegel's texts; a lot of the secondary literature on Hegel is based, in turn, on secondary literature. This helped old prejudices and gross mistakes to perpetuate and propagate.

B. Because of the speculative/dialectical structure of Hegel's philosophy, it is easier - for the less motivated or hasty reader - to take for Hegel's own conclusions the partial results of more complex reasonings. Hegel's own treatment of positions which he did not endorse is, typically, one of embracing and penetrating the opposition, to show, from within, their internal inconsistencies and self-contradictions.

It is therefore understandable that parts of Hegel's reasoning are actually deep analyses of theoretical positions which need to be sublated, and that the result of these analyses is different from the arguments used, although these arguments are integral part of the achieved result.

The profound significance of Hegel's concept of "sublation" ("Aufhebung") has often been missed. Sublation has been sometimes considered as simple "reconciliation" with previous opposed positions, sometimes as utter "elimination" of previous positions. It has rarely been understood that sublation means at the same time "overcoming" and "preservation" of previous positions.

C. Finally, Hegel became the victim of a heated political climate which has led to a propagandistic use of his presumed political philosophy against various political enemies.

During his life, Hegel was attacked by the German nationalists for his lack of patriotism, and despised by conservatives and reactionaries for his support to the ideals of the French Revolution. After his death, his philosophy was used as a banner for the progressive liberal youth active before the 1848 revolution in Germany, but also criticised for its moderate position by an emerging Communist movement. During the Bismarck era, Hegel was almost forgotten due to the trend of Positivism in philosophy, and when he was remembered he was often despised for his “un-German-ness” and his unpatriotic and French inspired philosophy.

During World War I, like any other culturally relevant German element, Hegel was made the subject of hasty, grossly simplifying and rough military propaganda, and condemned as one of the foremost expressions of a German will to power, tribalism, preponderance of the State and militarism. The advent of Nazism and the outbreak of World War II contributed to create a definitive false image of Hegel, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The outbreak of Cold War, and the links between Marxism and some of the concepts of Hegel’s philosophy, contributed to make Hegel the scapegoat, alternatively, for Nazism, militarism, totalitarianism and Communism.

X.2 Further reading

We recommend the book ‘The Hegel Myths and Legends’, Ed. Jon Stewart 1996. Its [Introduction](#) can be found online at our site.

The question list has been developed by Paul Trejo. The answers to section 1, 2 and X.1 have been written by Maurizio Canfora, including input from Paul Trejo and Kai Froeb. Sections 3, 4, 5 and parts of sections 6 are under current development and are planned to follow soon. Section 6.5 and 6.6 have been written by Paul Trejo and edited by Kai Froeb. Sections 7 and X.2 have been written by Kai Froeb, including input from Paul Trejo.

Hegel.Net is a joint effort of Hegelians worldwide. So, as always, *your* corrections, comments and additions to the above FAQ are most welcome. Please contact us [by email\(webmaster@hegel.net\)](mailto:webmaster@hegel.net).

Copyright © by hegel.net, Kai Froeb, Maurizio Canfora



[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License < https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)