

## In what sense was Hegel an Idealist?

### 1. Hegel described himself as an Idealist

Hegel was the final product of the philosophical movement known as “German Idealism,” which arose in Germany in response to [Immanuel Kant](#)’s Critical Philosophy. Kant had aimed to resolve the impasse between largely British Empiricism and largely French Rationalism. These philosophical currents were driven by problems which had arisen from the rapid development of natural science since Galileo, chiefly the nature of reality, and the sources and limits of human knowledge of Nature. Kant had proposed that a thing existed “in itself” but human beings could have knowledge only of phenomena, i.e., appearances, while the nature of the thing-in-itself remained unknowable. Kant’s approach generated many troubling dualisms and contradictions, and the German Idealists attempted to resolve these contradictions by focusing on *forms of knowledge*, rather than by speculating on the nature of a reality outside of human practice – which was the preserve of the Materialists.

Hegel put it this way:

“The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes Idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognising that the finite has no veritable being. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is actually carried out. ... A philosophy which ascribed veritable, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy; the principles of ancient or modern philosophies, water, or matter, or atoms are *thoughts*, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, ... in fact what is, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable.” ([Science of Logic, §316](#), Hegel, 1812)

So the archetypal materialists were the ancient Greek Atomists – everything, including human life, was the result of interactions between atoms. Modern materialism, which arose *after* Hegel, has a broader concept of material reality which is inclusive of social relations, but earlier materialists tended to be blind to the social formation of knowledge and consciousness.

It was the Idealists, Hegel in particular, who discovered the *social character* of consciousness and knowledge, not the materialists. However, the idealists did not make forms of practice explicitly the subject matter of their systems; rather they took logical categories, concepts, ideas, etc., as their subject matter, thus justifying their description as “Idealists.” A critical reading of Hegel will show however that *content* of these ideal forms is *forms of activity*.

Not all forms of idealism are the same. In particular, Hegel distinguished between *subjective* idealists like Bishop Berkeley, and objective idealists, such as Schelling and Hegel. That is, for Hegel, thought forms were not chimera existing only inside your head, but existed objectively, in activity and material culture, independently of any single individual, and which individuals acquired in the course of their activity.

## 2. Hegel emphasised the active side rather than passive contemplation

The very first expression of Marxism – Thesis 1 of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* – is referring to Hegel in particular when it speaks of “idealism”:

“The main defect of all hitherto-existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the Object, actuality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in opposition to materialism, was developed by idealism – but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, differentiated from thought-objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. ...” (*Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx 1845)

Not only did the Idealists see perception as an *active* process, they also saw the interpretation of one’s experience, how you conceived of and reacted to a situation, as an active process. The contrast with the materialist attitude to the social formation of human beings is set out in “Thesis 5”:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. ...” (*op. cit.*)

On the other hand, we see that Marx lambasted the philosophers for merely *interpreting* the world rather than seeking to change it, partly because “idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such,” being concerned with concepts rather than activity – the shadows rather than the real activity itself. So Marx presents us with the contradiction that it is the idealists who based themselves on the struggle to change reality as the source of knowledge of reality, rather than passive contemplation of reality like the materialists, but like all professional philosophers, they merely “interpreted” the world, rather than acting to change it.

Overall, Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* is a *defence* of Hegel’s idealism.

## 3. Hegel took the social elite to be the agents of change

Having witnessed social change in Britain thanks to industrialisation, and in France thanks to the guillotine, Hegel looked forward to a less traumatic and chaotic revolution in Germany which he saw as led by the social elite – philosophy professors, enlightened monarchs and a meritocratic civil service, rather than the blind destruction wrought by mobs and factories. Although he supported the right of slaves and oppressed nations to throw off their oppressors, he wanted his native Germany to achieve modernity through the perfection of a state which would guarantee the freedoms of its citizens. He saw states as guarantors of freedom, not instruments of oppression and was resolutely opposed to destructive, revolutionary methods of achieving social progress. He regarded the poor and working class as incapable of being agents of social progress – their misery was a social problem which could be solved only by the intervention of the enlightened elite.

When a work process is improved is it thanks to the supervisor who devises the improved method, or is the improvement implicit in the work process itself, so that we

should credit the workers not the supervisor for the improvement? When a social problem is solved by the passing of a new law, do we credit the parliamentarians who passed the new law, or the social movement who agitated for it? Do we get to a better world by (at least some) people forming an image of that better world and then going out and fighting for it, or does the better world arise out of contradictions inherent in the present state of affairs which drive people into actions irrespective of whether they can foresee the outcome? We call those people “idealists” who think that the social class whose business is plans and ideas are the agents of change, rather than the masses who act out those ideas. We call those people “materialists” who see social change arising directly out of the conditions of social life with ordinary people as its agents.

But recall *Thesis 5* quoted above: if, as materialists, we see people as products of their social conditions we reduce them to passive objects of change, leaving consciousness of change to the intelligentsia or the Party. Hegel and the Idealists erred on the side of change-from-above, but exclusive focus on change-from-below is equally mistaken because it makes the people passive objects of structural forces beyond their control.

#### 4. Hegel believed that institutions tend to be true to their concept

Anyone will recognise that over the years automobiles have come to better accord with their concept than they used to, conveying passengers to their desired destination in comfort without breaking down; likewise, washing machines have become more and more likely to wash your clothes and not wreck them since they were first invented in 1908. Hegel believed that this idea, which has been called “[normative essentialism](#),” applies to social institutions as well as useful artefacts, and is crucial to his social philosophy.

Although states originate in violence, according to Hegel, the concept of the state is Freedom – freedom from crime, famine and outside attack, freedom for personal development and the enjoyment of culture. That is to say, a worthwhile concept, once it comes into being, will tend to realise itself in increasingly perfect forms but falls into crisis when its concept no longer makes sense. In this sense, Hegel sees the logic of ideas and concepts as the driving force in history. Marx responded:

“*History* does *nothing*, it “possesses *no* immense wealth,” it “wages *no* battles.” It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; “history” is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims.” ([Holy Family](#), 1845)

Marx here is expressing a materialist position, in which people are not to be seen as captive of ideas but real actors. But if Marx is not to be accused of voluntarism, we must take account of his aphorism:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” ([The Eighteenth Brumaire](#), 1852)

That which is “transmitted from the past” – the institutions, symbols and beliefs built up by a people over centuries – unfolds in a way Hegel ably described with his dialectical idealist philosophy. But how people make use of those conditions is not always logical; people do not always do what they have to do, so to speak, so Marx’s insistence that the

realisation of an idea is a matter of *struggle* is an important corrective to the Idealist vision of history unfolding according to rational principles. The fact remains however that Hegel's Idealism is a powerful principle of historical development and historically, it has always been the idealists who have emphasised human agency in social change.

#### 5 . Hegel minimised the effect of mundane relations on institutions

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is sometimes unbelievably naïve: he thinks that the civil service is a meritocracy which serves the public good, and doesn't even consider that civil servants look out for themselves like everyone else; it doesn't seem to matter to him how judges are appointed or from what social class they are drawn, because it is their concept to apply the law to individual cases, not further their own class interest or political agenda; that the constitutional monarch, as the traditional owner of the land, is an extremely wealthy person does not cause Hegel to suspect that their judgment might be prejudiced by their wealth.

Marx ridicules this idealism, commenting wryly: "The man within the civil servant is supposed to secure the civil servant against himself" (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843), noting that a 'civil society' necessarily operates *within* the civil service. Hegel seems to think that officials will act according to their job description; Marx does not believe this. Everyone knows that the remuneration structure determines an employee's actions far more effectively than the organisation's mission statement.

In the USA everyone seems to accept that Supreme Court judges act according to their own political agenda, and that lower courts can be relied upon to discriminate against African Americans. However, in most developed countries, despite the fact that judges are always drawn from the most privileged section of society, the law does generally tend to develop and be applied in a rational fashion worthy of writing up in the law books, rather than being naked expressions of class prejudice. What is more, when decisions are made which *are* expressions of naked class prejudice, there is public outrage, appeals and political pressure, and even if it takes centuries, there is some merit in the aphorism: "The truth will out." In the long run, Hegel's idealism in this sense often turns out to have more merit than a cynical materialism would suggest.

#### 6. Hegel overestimated speculative reason relative to the social process itself

Hegel first published his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 1817. In this monumental work he aimed to prefigure (among other things) the entire development of natural science. But natural science did not progress by the writing of ever more perfect encyclopaedias; rather individuals and groups beavered away on narrowly defined problems, all the while lacking any sophisticated view of the whole (c.f. the definitions of idealism and materialism mentioned above in §1), and gradually, over the decades, the separate strands more and more came into contact with one another, and up to today viable overall scientific views began to emerge.

Each strand of research was influenced by the discoveries and theories and techniques and tools produced by the others; the scope and complexity and interconnectedness of human activity developed and developed, throwing up new insights, new techniques, new theories, new forms of experiment, new possibilities endlessly, way beyond the capacity of a single mind to plan or predict. Every insight, every discovery is the product of a human mind, but the process as a whole is a gigantic worldwide social process.

At each moment, the latest discovery to come out of the endless unfolding of human practice is intelligible in the light of what has gone before, what has already been discovered. But who can tell what the next discovery will be?

When Marx wrote the [Communist Manifesto](#) he left many questions unresolved. One of these was the question of whether the workers' movement could seize power and how they would use that power. Marx did not attempt to work this out in advance. He had to wait until the [Paris Commune](#) demonstrated what the workers movement would do. He then amended the Manifesto accordingly – adding to the [1872 Preface](#) to the *Manifesto* the words: “One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes.”

Likewise, in the writing of *Capital*, Marx took as his starting point not the [concept of value as such](#), but the [simplest social form](#) in which value was manifested, the exchange of commodities. Living in England, at that time the most advanced capitalist country, it was possible to *observe* the unfolding of the value relation from exchange of commodities. The “concept of value” was observable in the writings of the political economists, but *exchange of commodities* is a real act which can be witnessed and grasped viscerally by anyone. He could make the development of capital intelligible by means of his analysis of exchange, but he made only the most general and qualified predictions of where it was headed based on his clear view of where it was at the moment. But he could not predict the successive transformations of capital which would flow through the economy after his death, and Marx knew this. But compare Marx's analysis with [Hegel's naïve analysis of value](#).

As an Idealist, Hegel falsely believed that Logic would allow him to foresee what was as yet outside social experience. Given he was writing in 1817, before the Michelson-Morley experiment, the microscope and Darwinism, and the burgeoning of natural scientific investigation during the 19th century, it is obvious to us that the project of the *Encyclopaedia* was untenable. Only the social process itself as a whole can work out and reveal the real content of a concept; this insight is available to the theorist to the extent that they can observe and make intelligible what exists or is already at least in the process of development.

This is the difference between Idealism and Materialism in terms of method.

## Summary

Looking over the six ways in which I have said that Hegel was an Idealist, a common thread can be seen running through them. But it is no good “turning Hegel off his head, on which he was standing, and placing him upon his feet,” (Engels, [Ludwig Feuerbach](#)) because in many respects Hegel's idealism is a necessary and powerful asset. Hegel's idealism has to be appropriated in full consciousness of its limitations and one-sidedness.