

# In what sense was Hegel an Idealist?

## Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 2

When Engels declared in 1886 that materialism and idealism constituted “two great camps” it doubtless sounded good to his audience of self-educated artisans. A young worker in East London put it best for me when he asked rhetorically: “Who built Hadrian’s Wall?” But the endless repetition of this idea over the next 150 years has not been helpful. Materialism stands opposed to idealism along at least six different axes and in no case is truth entirely on the side of materialism.

### 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 Kant’s Critical Philosophy. Kant had aimed to resolve the impasse between Empiricism and Rationalism, and scepticism and dogmatism. These philosophical currents had been driven by problems which had arisen from the 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” and human beings could have knowledge only of *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*.”

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 practice, but earlier materialists, whether Democritus or Spinoza, were *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 the *content* of these ideal forms is *forms of human 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, ideals were not imaginings existing only inside your head, but existed objectively, in activity, institutions 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 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. ...”

Not only did the Idealists see the creation of institutions as objective activity, they saw *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 people are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed people are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is people 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. ...”

On the other hand, we see that Marx lambasted the philosophers (that is, Hegel) 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 – ideology rather than activity itself.

So Marx presents us with the contradiction that it is the *idealists* who saw the struggle to change reality, rather than the given reality, as fundamental, but like all professional philosophers, they merely “interpreted” the world, rather than acting to change it.

## 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 states which would guarantee the freedoms of their citizens. He saw states as guarantors of freedom, not instruments of oppression and was 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 engineer who devises the improved method, or should we credit the workers who actually implement the

process? 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 or not they 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 risk reducing 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 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 and only collapses when the concept becomes out of step with its conditions. In *this* sense, Hegel sees the logic of 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.”

Here Marx is expressing a materialist position, in that people are not to be seen as captive of ideas but as real actors. But if [Marx](#) is not to be accused of voluntarism, we must take account also 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.”

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. But it has always been the idealists who have emphasised human agency in social change. When Hegel talks of concepts as if they were living creatures with a will, he is only agreeing with the [Marx](#) when he said: “theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”

## 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 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 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, 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 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. 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 a naked expression 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. 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 truth than a cynical materialism would suggest. Science advances, despite the rewards offered for conformism, for example.

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

Hegel first published the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 1817. In this monumental work he aimed to outline (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, and gradually, over the decades, the separate strands more and more came into contact with one another, and viable overall scientific visions gradually emerged.

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, throwing up new insights, new techniques endlessly, way beyond the subjective 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 objective 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 waited until the Paris Commune demonstrated what the workers movement would do. He then amended the Manifesto accordingly – adding to the [1872 Preface](#) 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 the contradictions manifested in the present. But he could not predict the successive transformations of capital which would flow through the economy after his death, and Marx knew this.

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 “outside the head” 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 formation.

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 when [Marx](#) claims that “My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. .... With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again,” this is true enough in some senses, but quite false in other senses. The aphorism does not tell us what is to be abandoned and what is to be retained. Hegel’s idealism has to be appropriated in full consciousness of its limitations and one-sidedness.

## How to proceed?

[Engels](#) was not entirely mistaken when he claimed that “The great basic question of all philosophy, especially of more recent philosophy, is that concerning the relation of thinking and being.”

But Hegel does not use the term “being” in quite the same way as Marx did. For Hegel, “being” has the same scope as the verb “to be” which can refer to Mickey Mouse or a childhood memory equally as the number of your fingers. It is in fact an entirely empty concept. For Marx it could refer to “social being,” that is, a person’s place in social practice, or it could refer to the animal nature of a person – their material existence in either sense.

“Matter” is another problematic word. As [Lenin](#) correctly said: “Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to us by our sensations, ... while existing independently of them.” Hegel denotes the same category as “externality,” which as we learnt, is “*only the one concrete whole.*”

The question is not one of giving good definitions of “being” and “thought.” The question is to “where to begin?” The problem is to form a concept, for example from which consciousness, Nature and social existence are all *abstractions*.



For Hegel that concept was Spirit, *Geist*. For [Marx](#) it was *practice*: “All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”

Note that “*praxis*” is the German word for “practice” and does not have some separate meaning. The Soviet Activity Theorists from whom I draw, use the term “activity” in exactly the same sense. Behaviour differs from practice or activity because in “behaviour” we abstract from the consciousness with which an action is done, that is, in isolation from its motivation. “Consciousness” is also an *abstraction* from practice, or activity, that is, in isolation from what is actually done.

So a dichotomy immediately arises from setting out with a dualism of thought and behaviour. Thought and behaviour are abstractions from the one concrete whole.

A second dichotomy arises from setting out either from Nature – human beings are products and creatures of Nature, or from social practice alone. Nature is not something *other* than social practice. The solution to this dichotomy is to understand that the material world exists for us in so far as it is *included* in human activity, as it means. Hegel actually makes this point almost at the end – page 800 and something – of the *Science of Logic*.

So what I am proposing is that our starting point is *material practice*, the practice of human beings as material creatures of Nature, using elements of Nature in their every act, changing the material world and with that the conditions in which human beings will act in the future. Consciousness exists only insofar as it is manifested in practice; dreams and phantasies exist only insofar as they *eventually* manifest in practice. Concepts like consciousness, behaviour and Nature are abstractions, concepts we come to understand only in and through the study and understanding of material human practice. “The [dispute](#) over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question.”

I will elaborate on these ideas further in the 3rd and 4th lectures.