

[ [Home](#) ] [ [Syllabus](#) ] [ [Reading Schedule](#) ] [ [Study Guides](#) ] [ [ARP Topics](#) ]  
[ [Portfolio Requirements](#) ] [ [Recommended Events](#) ]

## Notes and Questions for Reading Hegel's Introduction to *The Philosophy of History*

Tom Bowen

Hegel is of singular importance for understanding the intellectual development of Europe (and the US) from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and he is an interesting and compelling thinker in his own right. But, he is notoriously difficult to read and understand. The following “notes and questions” are designed to aid you in your reading of Hegel’s text. The “notes” will provide some background information and direct your attention to important passages and ideas. The “questions” are designed to prompt you to reflect upon what Hegel is saying in the text—to try and relate Hegel’s ideas to other thinkers we have studied, but also to think carefully about the claims he is making and how they shape our understanding of our own world and history. The core idea here is simple: if you have at least a sketch of an answer for the questions developed here, you will have developed a reasonable understanding of the text itself. So, **THINK ABOUT THE QUESTIONS...** sketch out on paper possible answers to these questions.

**General Notes:** we’ll start with some general notes on the text, and then proceed more systematically through the text.

1. This text is based on a series of lectures that Hegel gave before students and the general public. What is important to note here is that Hegel will often present views that are contrary to his own in order to refute those views or show how those views are not complete—make sure you can note when Hegel is talking about his position and the position adopted by others.
2. There are a number of important concepts or words that Hegel uses and at least partially defines in the text. As you are reading, keep these words in mind and see whether you can provide some form of a definition or understanding of these terms: Reason, Spirit, Idea, realization of Idea, and actuality. If there are other words/terms/concepts that Hegel uses that you find confusing, **MAKE A NOTE** of these terms.
3. Finally, this whole text constitutes a complex argument and the presentation of a radically different world-view from our everyday experience of the world in many respects. So, as you are reading the text don’t lose sight of what came before—remember that everything links to everything else here. Also, try to relate what Hegel is doing to the work of previous “intellectual movements” we’ve studied. Can you see elements of the “Enlightenment” in Hegel? Elements of “Romanticism”?

Hegel's text is usually broken up into specific sections—and we'll move section by section. All section headings and page numbers come from the Hackett edition which we asked you to buy. If you are reading this online, the section headings will have to suffice—they may be a little different, but not too much.

### One: The Methods of History (pages 3-11)

In this section Hegel is primarily concerned to contrast the philosophical investigation into history from other methods of writing or investigating history. Most of this is relatively straight-forward, but it is important to keep in mind that Hegel is setting the stage for the development of what he considers to be the appropriate *philosophical* investigation of history. So, here are some basic questions:

1. What are the three methods of dealing with history? (See? That's an easy question!)
2. How are these three methods *distinguished from one another*? In other words, identify the basic "elements" of each method and contrast them with one another—in this section that will be easiest done with the first two methods.
3. What shouldn't we expect from a *philosophical* approach to history? What is the basic approach of *philosophical* history?
4. We should note the whole of the Introduction is really an introduction to the philosophical method of historical investigation so we don't get a complete picture of this method here; it is developed more fully throughout the rest of the text. But, there are some important things to note here:
  - a. Hegel says that "we cannot ever give up thinking" (10), what precisely does he mean by that? (Look at the rest of the sentence.) What does it mean to approach something (like history) thoughtfully?
  - b. Even though we can't ever give up thinking, nonetheless, philosophical thinking seems different from "everyday" thinking—there is just a hint here, but see if you can see what this difference is.
  - c. Hegel says that there is a "contradiction" (10-11) that appears immediately in the philosophical approach to history—can you explain what this contradiction is? What is the conflict between? (Hint: consider the two sides: thinking and what is thought about.)
5. As we leave this section we are leaving the easiest part of Hegel's text. I don't say this to scare you—but after this you've got to be serious about reading this. I want to make a few general suggestions:
  - a. First, NEVER GIVE UP! Hegel can be confusing, difficult, and frustrating—but don't let that stop you from reading the material. Keep working at it.
  - b. Second, TRY TO WORK OUT YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING. It may be wrong—don't worry about it. Being wrong is one way to figure out what is right.
  - c. When Hegel makes a really weird claim or starts using language you don't understand, TRY TO FIGURE IT OUT.
  - d. You have to READ ACTIVELY and CAREFULLY and so SLOWLY. Read and re-read, and then re-read it again. You can really get a lot out of Hegel (this is true with many important thinkers), but only if you work at it.

### Two: Reason in History (pages 12-18)

Things start to get interesting in this section. Hegel tells us that the “only thought which philosophy brings with it [to the study of history] is the simple thought ...that Reason rules the world” (12). Think about that last phrase: **REASON RULES THE WORLD!** What does this mean? What can it mean? Is it true? What would it mean if it were true? What would it mean if it were false? When I ask these kinds of questions (e.g. “what does it mean...?”) what I want you to do is consider what we should expect to find in history or in the world if it was truly rational (or ruled by reason); what might we expect the world to look like if it wasn’t ruled by reason (what would it be ruled by? Or would it be ruled by anything?).

This is the basic, core, idea in Hegel’s approach to everything—that Reason Rules the World. So, the most basic **QUESTION** you should focus on while reading this section is this: what does this mean? How does reason rule, what exactly is being ruled, and is this true? Is the world really rational in the sense that Hegel means it here?

1. After making this claim about Reason, Hegel develops this in the subsequent paragraphs. Here he uses some interesting terminology: reason as “substance” as well as “infinite power” and “infinite material” and “infinite form” (12). Try to figure out what Hegel means by these terms—what is the sense here?
2. Hegel also says that while this claim (that Reason Rules the World) is a presupposition, it is also the result of the investigation (see 12-13). In fact at one point he explicitly says:

But, in fact I need not require this belief on your part in advance. What I have said so far, and will say again, is not just to be taken as a presupposition of our science, but as a summary of the totality—as the *result* of the discussion upon which we are embarking, a result known to *me* because I already know the totality (13)

How can something be both a presupposition and a result? What is Hegel trying to do here?

3. According to Hegel there are two versions of the conviction that Reason Rules the World. The first takes its point of departure from Anaxagoras, and the second from the idea of providence.
  - a. Outline the core elements of each version
  - b. How are these versions related to each other? (What is the contradiction between them? see top of 16)
  - c. What is Hegel’s critique of providence –as it is usually understood? (16)
  - d. Can history be governed by chance? Can anything be governed by chance?
4. Why might it seem “scandalous” or dangerous for Hegel to claim that he “knows the plan of divine providence” in general? (17)
5. Hegel relates his work here, in the Philosophy of History, as a theodicy. What is the particular challenge of looking at world history as providential, or as theodic? (This will become clearer in the next section.)

### Three: Freedom, the Individual, and the State

**This section constitutes the philosophical core of Hegel's general theory of world history (section four basically shows, schematically, how this core ultimately "plays out" through world history). The title of this section lays out the three elements:**

- **Freedom:** this is, as we've already seen, the goal of freedom. History is the realization of freedom in the world, or better, the self-realization of freedom.
- **The Individual:** this is, as we will see, the basic "matter" in which or through which freedom realizes itself—the realization of freedom is the realization of individual freedom, and that is realized when the individual wills (freely) the universal—comprehends (knows) and wills itself as universal. By "the individual" Hegel here basically means "us"—our concrete lives, our passions, our fears, our pains and joys, our struggles, our messiness. This is the "stuff" of history, and the "stuff" of freedom. It is at the level of the individual that we see and know the heartache and the pleasure of history.
- **The State:** if the individuals are the basic matter (the "atoms" if you will—not a perfect analogy) then the state (or states—they will also have a history) are the full forms (the "animals" composed of those atoms acting in relation to one another) that constitute the realm of world history. World history is NOT a history of land masses or oceans or mountains; nor is it a history of individuals (individual people or plants or animals); it is a history of STATES—which are composed of individuals living together in a particular geography and with a certain temporality and with a particular organization.

**Despite the title of this section, the core concept here is that of SPIRIT. Spirit (always with a capital "S") is freedom realizing itself, or rather; the self-realization of Spirit is freedom. According to Hegel there are three topics that need to be addressed: the nature or definition of Spirit, the means Spirit uses in its self-realization, and the shape that Spirit takes in its complete realization (the State)—these correspond to the three elements listed above.**

## **I. THE NATURE OF SPIRIT**

**We have already noted that for Hegel the nature of Spirit is "freedom"—this section lays out a short sketch of the history of the world as a history of freedom. Read it carefully—it is short, but important.**

**You must be very careful about understanding what Hegel means by freedom, and how this constitutes both the goal of world history and the fundamental nature of Spirit. This will become clearly (maybe) in the following sections, but here are a few notes:**

- **One "meaning" or aspect of freedom is the sense of being "free from"—of not being told what to do or being forced to do something you do not want. This is a real meaning of freedom, but for Hegel it is ultimately a child's understanding—it is not THE real meaning of the word.**
- **Another definition of freedom is "doing what you want to do." This is also a real meaning for Hegel, but again, it is childish, and not THE full or complete understanding of freedom.**
- **To be FREE in the fullest sense of the term for Hegel, is to be truly what you are—to**

actualize your essence or truth as a human being (or as Spirit, since this is what is being actualized in world history). The true essence of humanity (as Spirit) is reason, so to be free (truly free) is to be rational and to realize or actualize that rationality in the world. So, when Hegel says that the world is rational, or that reason rules the world, it does so through our activity as rational (as well as desiring) agents. Freedom = Reason = Spirit. This is a process or an activity—we are not “simply” free; rather, freedom is something we do. (Maybe it makes sense this way: freedom is not properly a NOUN, it is a VERB. To be free is something we actualize through our living together in STATES and the level of freedom we actualize constitutes the level of self-realization achieved by Spirit, and this constitutes our concept of ourselves as humans.)

## II. THE MEANS OF SPIRIT.

This is where things get interesting. Here I will only identify some quotes and ask some questions.

1. Consider carefully the opening remarks Hegel makes here about human passions, needs, and desires and examining history through the lens of these passions leads us to grieve for humanity, and leads to moral outrage (23-24). How can we escape seeing history as nothing more than a “slaughter-bench” (24)?
2. What are the elements necessary for the actuality or the actualization of the potentiality of Spirit? (25)
3. Notice in particular the importance of SATISFACTION; of the satisfaction of our needs, desires, and passions. How does this demand that our needs be satisfied relate to the view that history is a slaughter-bench? What does it mean to demand the satisfaction of our needs in the course of history? What kind of demand is this? Consider this in relation to Hobbes and Locke, as well as the work of the Romanic poets (and even, if you want to stretch yourself even more, Renaissance humanism).
4. What is the possible misunderstanding that Hegel talks about?
5. How do these two elements of history (what Hegel calls the “warp and woof” (26) of history) interweave to produce history? {NOTE: if you don’t know anything about weaving cloth or tapestries, then the idea of a warp and woof may be confusing. On a loom the WARP are the threads that run lengthwise, and the WOOF are the threads that run crosswise. Interweaving these two sets of threads makes a cloth.}
6. Notice this passage: “From this comment about the second essential element in the realization of a historical aim, it follows (if, for a moment, we look at the state) that a state is well constituted and internally strong if the private interests of the citizens is united with the universal goal of the state, so that each finds its fulfillment and realization in the other.” (25) What do you think of this as a criterion for measuring the just-ness (well constituted) of a state? Is this what makes a state just? How can my private interest be united with the universal goal of the state? What is that universal goal? (It is not mysterious---think about it.)
7. Consider very carefully everything that Hegel has to say about the WILL (25-32). This discussion of the will, along with the passions and Spirit, lays out in part what Hegel means by FREEDOM. So, using this language of the will come up with a short (1-2 sentence definition) of freedom.

8. Look very carefully at the “examples” Hegel provides (30-31) to help explain what he means by the freedom of the will.
9. Hegel says that world history is “not the place for happiness” (29). How does this relate to his discussion of freedom, the will, and history?
10. Ultimately, this discussion of will and history leads us to the “world historical individual” (32). What is the importance of the world historical individual (WHI)? How were Caesar and Alexander such individuals? Who else might count as such individuals? Do you agree that there are such individuals?
11. More important: how do WHIs move history forward? What does it mean to say that they DON’T KNOW THEY ARE DOING IT?
12. Hegel examines some “criticisms” of WHIs (34-35) —what are these criticisms, and why does Hegel reject them?
13. This is a very important phrase: “the *Cunning of Reason*” (35). Take some time, think about what you have read, and write a paragraph or two that explains this idea and its importance for Hegel’s philosophy of history (relate it to freedom, Spirit’s self-realization, and history as a slaughter-bench).
14. The final pages of this section (35-40) constitute a discussion of the importance of “morality, ethics, and religious commitment” (36) to world history—as the actualization of Spirit, but also as victims of history. Moreover, Hegel tells us that any “weakening” or “deterioration” of ethics and religion are solely the fault of individuals (36-37). Finally, Hegel dismisses an “idealistic” or “moralistic” vision of history—they claim that states or historical epochs do not “live up to their ideals.” What is his criticism of this position? Why does he think it is a mistake to think like this?
15. VERY IMPORTANT!! During this discussion of “idealistic” visions of history and the state Hegel makes a really strong and potentially scary claim: “the real world is as it ought to be” (39). What can he mean by this? Consider that he is living during a period of intensive slavery in the Americas, civil unrest and revolution in Europe, the beginnings of European colonization in Africa and Asia, both events were very violent. How can he say that this is the way the world *ought* to be? Would he say the same during the Holocaust? What can this mean? (When you are thinking about this, first try to be sympathetic or generous towards Hegel—that is, don’t start out imagining that he is an idiot or evil person; after you’ve given him some credit, then you can lay into him, if you want.)

### III. THE STATE AS REALIZATION OF SPIRIT.

We have already seen that Spirit realizes itself in the world as “states.” What we need to do now is figure out what Hegel means by this term. So, here are the two basic questions to keep in mind while reading this section:

1. What is a state? What are the “parts” or “elements” of a state?
2. How is a state a vehicle for the realization of Spirit? (Or, how are states the self-realization of Spirit at specific moments in its history?)
3. How do states constitute in their relations to one another and in their temporality (in their being in time) the structure of world history?

As you read the answers to these questions should be relatively clear, at least in outline.

**But, here are some more specific questions and passages to consider:**

- 1. Hegel tells us that the state is an ethical totality since it is the “union of two wills: the subjective will and the rational will.” (41) What is the “subjective will”? What is the rational will? How can they be unified?**
- 2. Look carefully at the different “concepts” of freedom that Hegel considers in the opening passages of this section. Notice in particular the relationship between LAW and FREEDOM. How are these two related? Try to write out a short paragraph that explains this relationship.**
- 3. There are a number of interesting and important passages in this discussion—identify some for discussion in class (40-42).**
- 4. Before presenting a more detailed picture of his concept of the state, Hegel quickly discusses and criticizes (at least in part) two alternative approaches. OUTLINE these two approaches (they should appear familiar from other readings) and how Hegel critiques them. (43-45)**
- 5. Starting on page 45, Hegel critiques the notion of “consent” as the core of political freedom—again, explain what he means by this, and what he thinks is the problem with considering consent the basis of political legitimacy (and who does he have in mind here?).**
- 6. Starting on pages 46-47 Hegel begins to lay out his own concept of the state. He does this by considering the different “forms” of government (a classical approach) which distinguishes between the organizations of different types of states. Go through this carefully and note the different types of organization—they will have a history as well.**
- 7. Near the end this discussion (51) Hegel notes an important mistake that people make about freedom and how it is realized in a state—what is the mistake, and how does Hegel propose we counter it?**
- 8. Finally, look at the summation that Hegel provides of the state (55-56). Note in particular the importance of religion, morality, ethics, as well as geography and history. Here Hegel uses the phrase “the Spirit of a people” (55). To really understand this, consider a contrast between these two states: Japan and the USA. Does the USA meet Hegel’s notion of a state (or a nation-state)? Why or why not?**