



# Hegel and the Idea of the Dialectic

Week 2. 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017  
The character of Hegel's thought

# Class recap

- Introduce the course aims, outline and reading
- Learn about Hegel's life and context
- Introduce the 'dialectic' and Geist
- Complete pre-course paperwork and begin discussing his philosophy



# Class aims

- Understand what is meant by 'dialectic', and why it characterises Hegel's philosophical, social and political thought
- Encounter Hegel's formative influences (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Romanticism)
- Read passages from the "Lesser Logic" to gain a firmer grasp of his dialectical thinking
- Learn about the general character of Hegel's thought, its aims and objectives

# Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770-1831



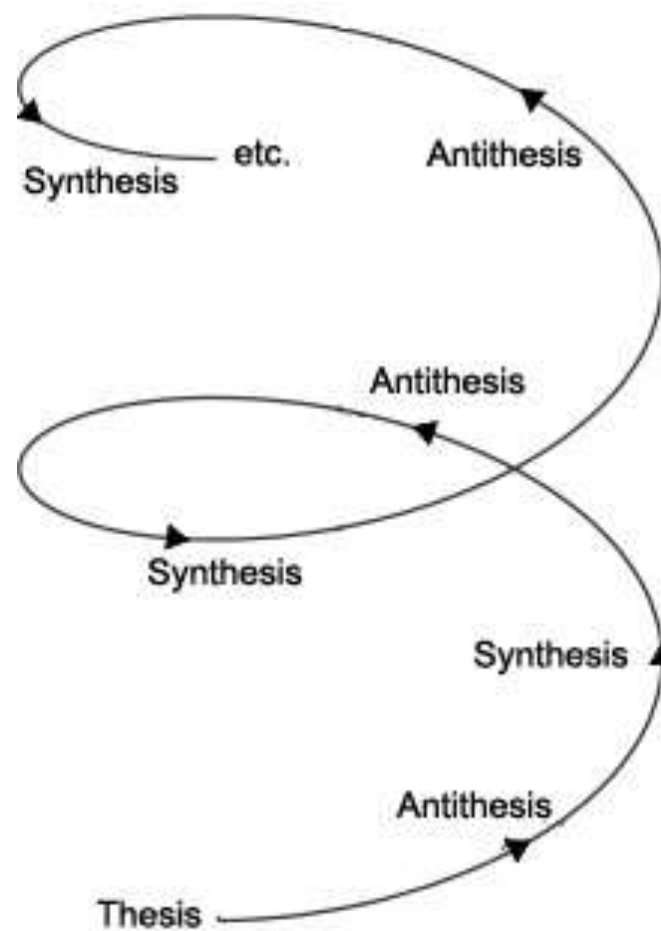
# Hegel in a nutshell

- German philosopher, 1770-1831
- Drew on Kantian critical philosophy and Romanticism to become the most systematic figure of 'German Idealism'
- Produced a systematic but notoriously difficult philosophy, both in terms of its concepts and its language
- Famous for his account of the dialectic running through history
- Major influences on Marxism, existentialism and subsequent thought
- Few modern philosophers have attracted more vitriol
- Before condemning him, our task will be to read and understand him





# The Dialectic



‘The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way when the fruit comes, the blossom may be explained to be a false form of the plant’s existence, for the fruit appears as its true nature in place of the blossom. The ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes these stages moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and constitutes thereby the life of the whole.’

- From the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*

# What is the dialectic?

- Hegel establishes a new way of thinking, the dialectic, in which thinking advances by overcoming and incorporating its contradictions into a greater whole
- Hegel is concerned with how thought strives towards totality through a continual, dynamic practice or activity of thinking through and beyond its contradictions
- Thus a concept collides with its negation, resulting in its overcoming and resolution through the process of *sublation* (*aufhebung*)
- Before Hegel, dialectic referred to the Socratic process of argument, in which critical questions revealed contradictions in a given argument, enabling a closer account of the truth through first principles
- But Hegel doesn't seek first principles. He instead takes thought to be intrinsically social and historical, with concepts having an objective existence beyond individual human minds

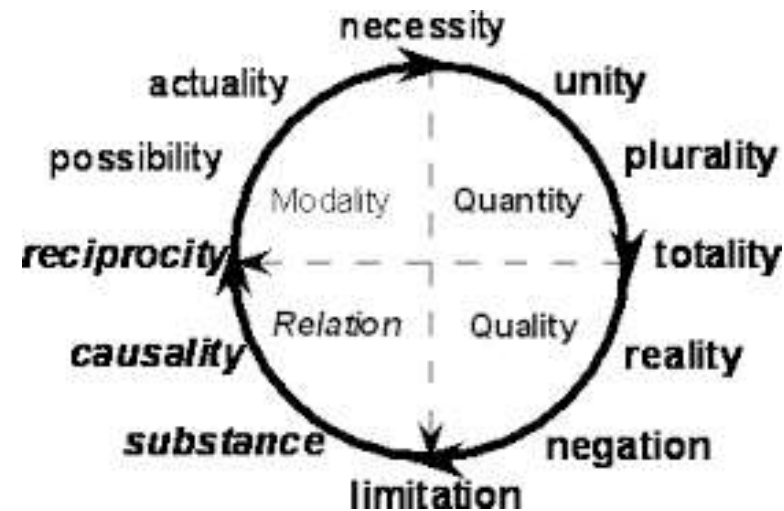


# Geist



# 1. After Kant

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) transforms philosophy in Germany through his three *Critiques*. Why?



$$7 + 5 = 12$$



1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope?

‘All principles of the pure understanding are nothing further than *a priori* principles of the possibility of experience, and all synthetic *a priori* propositions are related to the latter alone, indeed their possibility itself rests entirely on this relation.’



# 1. After Kant

- Challenges of scepticism, defending Christian morality, and schisms in the new science between Newton and Leibniz
- Its Copernican shift is from assuming *cognitions must conform to objects* to instead how '*objects must conform to our cognition*'
- We can have a priori knowledge of the world precisely because it is dependent on the human mind. The sensible world is *constructed* by the mind out of passive sensory matter and a priori forms of reason, which structure its experience.
- **Not** what do we know about the world from experience? **Instead** we ask "how is experience possible?"

‘Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind’

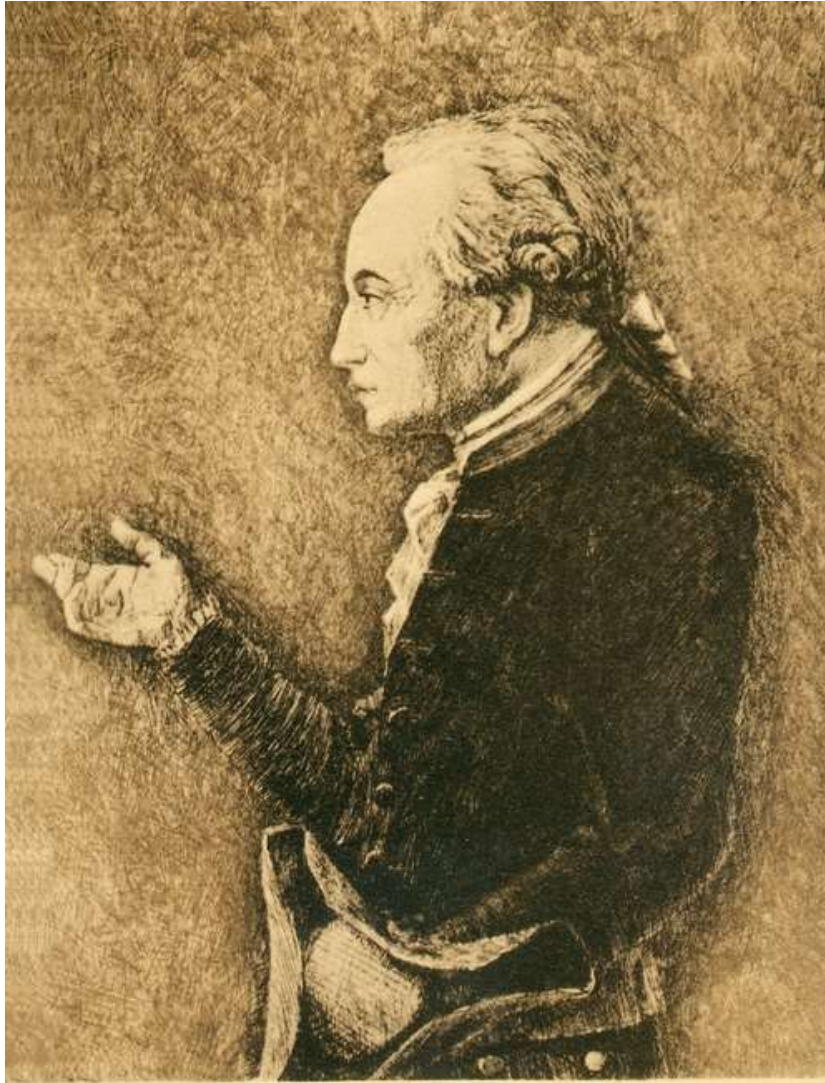
‘... space and time, as the necessary conditions of all (outer and inner) experience, are merely subjective conditions of all our intuition, in relation to which therefore all objects are mere appearances and not things given for themselves in this way’.



# 1. After Kant

- Experience must have a certain necessary structure in order to count as being experience at all
- Thus our minds are not passive in receiving impressions, but actively *construct* and participate in forming our experience
- A synthesis of concepts from the understanding (form) and intuitions from sensibility (content) is necessary for synthetic a priori
- Space and time are simply forms of intuition and are not real in themselves, giving only knowledge of appearances, not reality...
- Categories give subjective experience objective validity
- But theoretical philosophy must restrict itself to what can be known through possible experience. Everything beyond this is an all-too-human descent into 'transcendental ideas', which we can think, but not know





Königsberg i. Pr. Kant.

C153



# 1. After Kant

- In a nutshell, Hegel is particularly influenced by Kant's Idealism, and his use of the categories
- 'the thought-determinations or *concepts of the understanding* make up the *objectivity* of the cognitions of experience' (*Encyclopaedia*)
- Yet Kant is more restrictive in his claims: while we can demonstrate that our concepts make possible objects as we experience them, we cannot prove that our concepts make possible objects as they are in themselves.
- Hegel and others will push further, asking:
  - *why* we cannot know the thing-in-itself
  - *how* Kant can argue *for* the categories, or the understanding as a faculty of judging, without first demonstrating the nature of these
- 'Kant's philosophy took the easy way in its *finding* of the categories', because he simply derived them from what he *assumed* thought to be'.
- Kant leaves us with a 'sack full of faculties'





## 2. Absolute Idealism: Fichte



## 2. Absolute Idealism: Fichte

- Begins the rejection of the thing-in-itself distinction: consciousness does not have any grounding on a 'real' world: it has no grounding on anything outside itself. The whole world is produced by active minds
- In following the 'spirit' rather than 'letter' of Kant, Fichte develops and transforms Kant's notion of transcendental apperception – the world rests on self-consciousness
- Whereas for Kant the 'I think' is merely an identical subject to which we refer our representations, for Fichte the self is an absolutely unconditioned, productive ground of all things
- This absolute self has the power to posit itself, and has complete knowledge of itself
- This self-positing self is truly free and active, and has an intellectual intuition of itself, not by the senses
- Self-activity therefore trumps representation – the self gulfs theoretical and practical reason, nature and freedom



## 2. Absolute Idealism: Schelling





## 2. Absolute Idealism: Schelling

- Fichte's system fails to account for the objective, external natural world in its account of self-positing
- Schelling instead develops a philosophy of nature (*naturphilosophie*), demonstrating how free self-conscious subjectivity is grounded in nature
- Nature is a productivity, one that can never appear in itself, only through the form of products, which continually transform
- This productive nature is in parallel to the absolute self – two (somehow) interrelated subjects
- Schelling, like Fichte, ultimately seeks a solution to subject-object relations founded in something other than merely that which it is presented to us – the perspectival subject – but in its objective aspect – the absolute self.





# Letter to Schelling, April 1795

- 'From the Kantian system and its highest completion I expect a revolution in Germany. It will proceed from principles that are present and that only need to be elaborated generally and applied to all hitherto existing knowledge ... I believe that there is no better sign of the times than this, that mankind is being presented as so worthy of respect in itself. It is proof that the aura of prestige surrounding the heads of the oppressors and gods of this earth is disappearing. The philosophers are proving the dignity of man. The peoples will learn to feel it.'

## 2. Hegel after Kant

- The role of the 'I' of apperception in Kant is taken over by *geist* (Spirit), a universal, impersonal subject of thought with priority over the plurality of individual self-consciousnesses – subjectivity as such, as distinguished from the subjectivity of individual thinkers
- Spirit has a profound connection with human social existence
- He reverses the relation between thought and subjectivity, so that the concepts which constitute reality are no longer representations in the subject but rather real entities of a semi-Platonic kind
- Conceptuality replaces subjectivity as the ground of philosophical explanation and reality itself. Hegel would dismiss Kant as merely 'subjective' and 'psychological'



# Absolute Idealism: Hegel

- Kant's categories are too restrictive: they do not present knowledge merely as it exists *for us*, but present the structure of objectivity as such.
- *Thinking presents being*, through the categories.
- Appearance manifests the thing-in-itself:
- 'the true objectivity of thinking consists in this: that thoughts are not merely our thoughts, but at the same time the *In-itself* of things and of whatever else is objective'.
- The categories are also dialectical, developing through their opposites. Thought apprehends 'the unity of the determinations in their opposition'.

# Absolute Idealism: Hegel

- Being by thought is conceived of historically, as Spirit develops and gradually achieves self-consciousness
- Task of philosophy is to express the system of concepts progressively realised in natural and human history – the dynamic logic of the ‘self-moving Concept’
- This involves a review of all human consciousness in all its phases, be it art, religion and philosophy
- In doing so, it articulates the Absolute – an exhaustive, unconditioned and self-grounding system of concepts made concrete in actuality, in the world of experience
- Whereas Fichte and Schelling attempt to give a single fixed point from which thought proceeds from, Hegel rejects this. Conceptualisation is a circle, without beginning, which terminates in the Absolute
- Philosophy instead takes place on a plane of autonomous conceptuality, outside the orbit of any individual knowing subject.



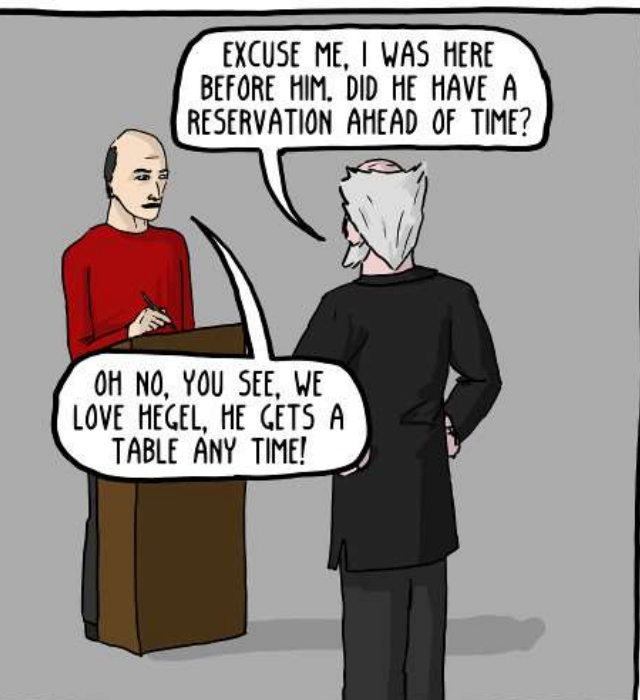


# Absolute Idealism: round-up

- Fichte, Schelling and Hegel all deny the noumena/phenomena distinction and claim we can know the thing-in-itself
- We know it through our ideas (Idealism), hence the importance of beginning with our consciousness of the world
- All glimpse an 'unconditioned' or 'Absolute' in a way that Kant's critical philosophy disallows
- Subsequent interpretations of Hegel are divided as to whether he marks a return to a pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics, or instead pushes further than Kant's critical philosophy, identifying the socio-historical conditions of thought and challenging Kant to think harder

# Course paperwork

- Before going to break, please take a moment to complete the course forms
- Reflect to yourself, and perhaps discuss with your neighbour, what you'd like to get most out of the course
- If there's any questions come and talk to me during the break or note my email down for later: [Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk](mailto:Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk)





### 3. Hegel and Schopenhauer

- Both teach at the University of Berlin, and both take parallel routes beyond Kant
- Both refute the distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself
- Whereas Hegel identifies the role of *Geist*, Schopenhauer distinguishes between the world of representation and of will
- Unlike the noumenal, will can be grasped as the immediate, non-representational awareness of ourselves as striving bodily agents
- This grants us awareness of ourselves as things in themselves
- Reality consists ultimately in a single undifferentiated will, of which empirical reality is the appearance
- This will is intrinsically blind, unlike the rationality and purposiveness of the Absolute as conceived by Fichte and Hegel

‘I were to say that the so-called philosophy of this fellow Hegel is a colossal piece of mystification which will yet provide posterity with an inexhaustible theme for laughter at our times, that it is a pseudo-philosophy paralyzing all mental powers, stifling all real thinking, and, by the most outrageous misuse of language, putting in its place the hollowest, most senseless, thoughtless, and, as is confirmed by its success, most stupefying verbiage, I should be quite right.

Further, if I were to say that this summus philosophus [...] scribbled nonsense quite unlike any mortal before him, so that whoever could read his most eulogized work, the so-called *Phenomenology of the Mind*, without feeling as if he were in a madhouse, would qualify as an inmate for Bedlam, I should be no less right.’



## 4. Holderlin, “In Lovely Blue”



Like the stamen inside a flower  
The steeple stands in lovely blue  
And the day unfolds around its needle;

The flock of swallows that circles the steeple  
Flies there each day through the same blue air  
That carries their cries from me to you;

We know how high the sun is now  
As long as the roof of the steeple glows,  
The roof that's covered with sheets of tin;

Up there in the wind, where the wind is not  
Turning the vane of the weathercock,  
The weathercock silently crows in the wind.



You too wanted better things, but love  
forces all of us down. Sorrow bends us more  
forcefully, but the arc doesn't return to its  
point of origin without a reason.

Upwards or downwards! In holy Night,  
where mute Nature plans the coming days,  
doesn't there reign in the most twisted Orcus  
something straight and direct?

This I have learned. Never to my knowledge  
did you, all-preserving gods, like mortal  
masters, lead me providentially  
along a straight path.

The gods say that man should test  
everything, and that strongly nourished  
he be thankful for everything, and understand  
the freedom to set forth wherever he will.

- Holderlin, "The Course of Life"

## 4. German Romanticism

- Movement in literature, poetry and the arts which sought a return to an idealised view of nature, beauty and the sublime
- *Sturm und Drang* (late 18<sup>th</sup> century) emphasises emotional turbulence, and the irrational, passionate nature of human life (1776 Klinger play)
- Re-emerges in Jena (1798-1804) through the von Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Holderlin and others, asserting the superiority of the individual and of genius to pursue its own nature
- Emphasis on individual and collective freedom over despotism
- Notable figures include Hamann, Goethe, Schiller, Holderlin, Beethoven, Brahms, Wagner
- Concern with capturing human experience and emotion beyond the narrow parameters of rationalism

## 4. Romanticism in Hegel

‘The bud disappears when the blossom breaks through, and we might say that the former is refuted by the latter; in the same way when the fruit comes, the blossom may be explained to be a false form of the plant’s existence, for the fruit appears as its true nature in place of the blossom. The ceaseless activity of their own inherent nature makes these stages moments of an organic unity, where they not merely do not contradict one another, but where one is as necessary as the other; and constitutes thereby the life of the whole.’

- From the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*



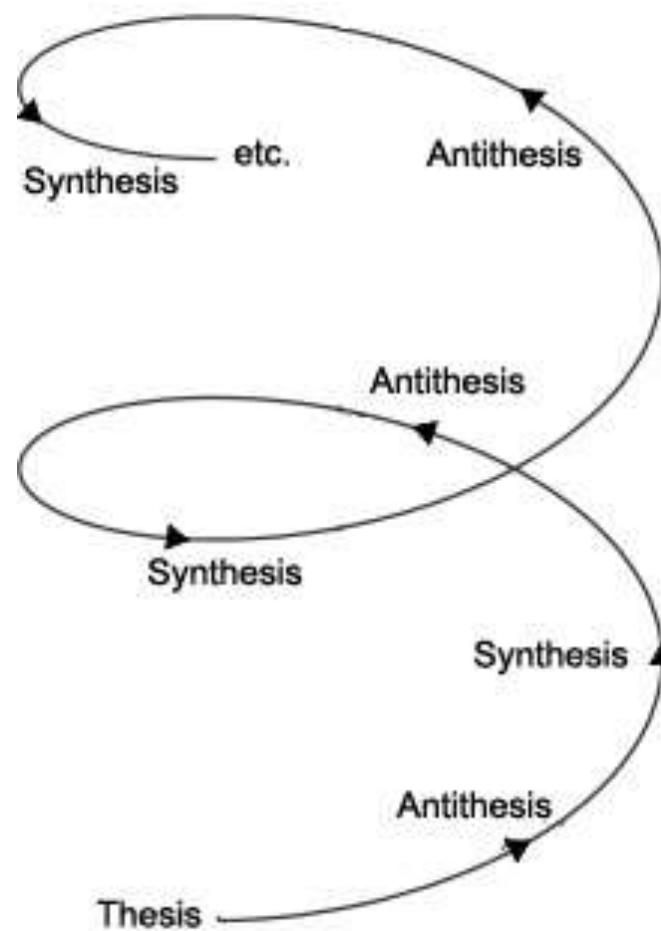
## 5. The “Lesser Logic”

- We will now turn to sections 11-15 of the “Lesser Logic”, from Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830)
- In groups of 2-3, please approach the following questions:
- How does Hegel argue that thought is inherently dialectical? (11)
- Why does this lead to a ‘hatred of reason’?
- What is the relation between experience and thought? (12)
- How does thought evolve, and to what end? (13-15)?
- If time, explain what Hegel means by ‘cherries’ to ‘fruit’ (13), and ‘circle of circles’.

## 5. The “Lesser Logic” (11)

- The highest, most inward form of the mind’s life is thought, where thought itself is its object, not mere will or imagination.
- Thought intrinsically falls into contradictions as it lacks the certainty of its object. It is compelled to resolve these contradictions, and is able to do so through reflection.
- But the difficulty of thought has led to a ‘hatred of reason’, and a preference for ‘immediate’, sense-based knowledge (i.e. empiricism)

# The Dialectic



## 5. The “Lesser Logic” (12)

- Thought begins from experience, but has to set itself up beyond and against it to rise beyond it, through an abstract Idea (the Absolute, or God).
- This requires a process of contradiction and mediation, going from sense to the abstract, from particulars to the universal.
- Yet science and experience provide materials for thought, and philosophy in turn gives them *freedom* of thought: a universal, *a priori* nature to connect facts into universal truths

## 5. The “Lesser Logic” (13)

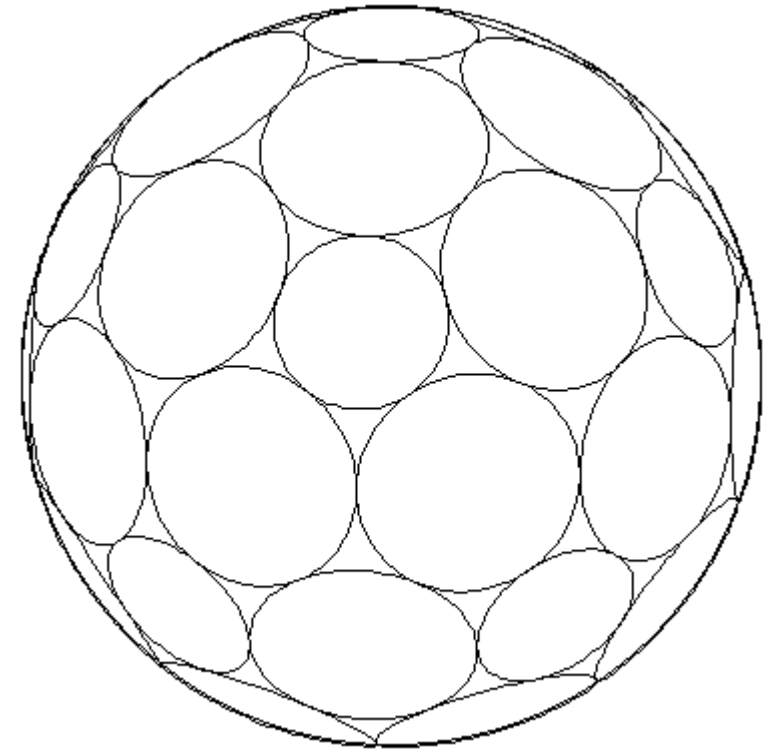
- The history of philosophy also involves a continual dialectical development.
- Each philosophical system marks the development on previous ones, and is itself a particular expression of a universal, singular mind (*Geist*) whose nature is to bring itself into self-consciousness
- Each one is like a particular kind of fruit – say cherries – and to reject one because it cannot stand for all and be *The Philosophy* is absurd, holding one system to an impossible standard





## 5. The “Lesser Logic” (14-15)

- Philosophy cannot be coherent unless it acts as a totality or unity of all possible principles. Any partial or non-systematic philosophies are incomplete and inadequate (14)
- It must strive to be a ‘circle of circles’. Each particular circle contains the Idea in its totality, but the whole Idea is constituted by a number of particular ‘phases’ or circles, ideas which constitute necessarily its totality. (15)





# Round-up

- Hegel's thought is notoriously difficult, and this is reflected in the unusual and forbidding terminology he employs and invents
- It is akin to learning a new language, or 'grammar of thought' as he says in *Science of Logic*. It takes patience and rewards effort
- Thinking ultimately is active, it *does*. Thought takes us somewhere, towards the Absolute. Unlike other philosophers, Hegel will not use or repeat precise definitions. The meaning appears holistically, through reading and persisting through passages
- Next week, please read the "Introduction" (sections 81-89) to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* AND Chapter 1 of Robert Stern, *Routledge Guidebook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit*
- The bravest among you are also directed to the Preface...

# Moodle login

Username: firstnamelastname

Password: FirstNameInitial (capitals)

E.g. Georg Hegel

Username: georghegel

Password: GEORGH

