

ABSOLUTE IDEALISM

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Metaphysics, Epistemology, Logic)

Proponents: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (Primary), F. W. J. Schelling

1. Core Principles

Absolute Idealism represents the comprehensive metaphysical system developed principally by the German philosopher **Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel** (1770-1831). It is predicated on the foundational belief that reality is fundamentally spiritual, rational, and ultimately unified. This system proposes that the entire universe--the totality of existence--is constituted by a single, all-encompassing spiritual substance or Mind, which Hegel termed the **Absolute** or *Geist* (Spirit/Mind). The Absolute is not conceived as a static deity or immutable substance, but rather as a dynamic, self-developing process that unfolds through history and logical necessity, striving toward perfect self-consciousness and systematic articulation.

A defining feature of Absolute Idealism is its resolution of the traditional philosophical dualism between consciousness and reality, or subject and object. Hegel argued that the perceived separation between the conscious observer (the individual person or subject) and the external environment (the world or object) is merely a necessary, transitional stage in the developmental history of consciousness, which is ultimately overcome in the Absolute. Crucially, the theory posits a **direct fusion** between people and the world in which they live. According to this view, the subjective mind and objective reality are not two distinct kinds of stuff, but rather moments within the integrated life of *Geist*.

If this fundamental unity--this necessary connection between the knowing subject and the known object--were severed, Hegel argued that neither would attain full self-awareness. The world would present itself to the subject as an incomprehensible, unintelligible collection of external facts, while the subject would remain an abstract, isolated entity incapable of actualizing its conceptual potential. The famous maxim of Absolute Idealism, "the real is rational and the rational is real," summarizes this integration, asserting that all of reality, from the laws of physics to historical institutions, is structured by reason and can, therefore, be conceptually understood by the self-knowing Spirit.

2. Historical Context and Development

Absolute Idealism arose in the wake of **Immanuel Kant's** critical philosophy during the German Idealism movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Kant had established a rigid epistemological boundary, asserting that human knowledge was confined to phenomena (the world as it appears to us), leaving the noumenal realm (things-in-themselves) inaccessible. This created

a profound dissatisfaction among subsequent German thinkers who sought a unified metaphysical vision that could overcome Kant's perceived split between the knowing subject and ultimate reality.

Predecessors like **Johann Gottlieb Fichte** and **F. W. J. Schelling** attempted to bridge this gap. Schelling, in particular, proposed an Objective Idealism, suggesting that nature and intelligence were unified in a single, fundamental Absolute. However, Hegel criticized these earlier attempts for relying too heavily on non-rational methods, such as intellectual intuition, to grasp the Absolute. Hegel's innovation was the insistence that the Absolute must be demonstrated systematically and logically. His monumental works, including *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and the *Science of Logic* (1812-1816), provided the rigorous, comprehensive framework necessary for Absolute Idealism.

Hegel's system represents a grand attempt to synthesize and surpass all preceding philosophical traditions. By postulating a unifying, rational Spirit that manifests itself throughout the entirety of existence--in nature, history, society, and thought--Hegel sought to resolve age-old dichotomies: mind versus matter, necessity versus freedom, and the finite versus the infinite. This development positioned Absolute Idealism as a total system of reality, aiming to incorporate all partial truths uncovered by earlier philosophical systems as necessary, albeit incomplete, stages in the Absolute's ongoing process of self-discovery and realization.

3. The Dialectical Method and Geist

The core mechanism driving the self-realization of the Absolute is the **Dialectical Method**. For Hegel, the dialectic is not merely a mode of argumentation but the intrinsic, dynamic structure of reality and thought itself. It is a three-stage process, typically summarized as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. An initial concept (thesis) inevitably develops internal contradictions when rigorously examined (antithesis), leading to a higher, more complex concept (synthesis) that resolves the conflict by incorporating the partial truths of both preceding moments. This continuous, self-correcting movement is what fuels all change--logical, historical, and intellectual--propelling the entire system toward rationality.

Central to this process is *Geist*, which serves as the overarching subject of Absolute Idealism. While often translated as "Spirit" or "Mind," *Geist* embodies the entirety of the rational, historical, and cultural reality that humanity participates in, manifesting itself through ethical life, law, art, and philosophy. The consciousness of the individual person is understood as a finite expression or component of the larger, collective *Geist*. Consequently, the progress of human history--the rise and fall of civilizations, the development of legal systems, and the evolution of knowledge--is interpreted by Hegel as the relentless narrative of *Geist* moving toward complete self-recognition and freedom.

Hegel's philosophical encyclopedia meticulously maps this development, dividing the Absolute into

three main phases: the **Logic**, which studies the forms of thought independent of concrete reality (the Absolute "in itself"); the **Philosophy of Nature**, which examines the Absolute as manifested externally in the physical world (the Absolute "out of itself"); and the **Philosophy of Spirit**, which traces the Absolute's return to self-consciousness through human subjective, objective (social/political), and absolute (art, religion, philosophy) forms of spirit (the Absolute "for itself"). This systematic organization ensures that every facet of existence is accounted for as a necessary element within the integrated life of the Absolute.

4. Key Concepts and Components

The Absolute: The singular, foundational reality that is infinite, rational, and fully self-knowing. Unlike transcendent deities, the Absolute is **immanent**, meaning it is present within and constitutes all phenomena. Its nature is not static being, but continuous, dynamic becoming, culminating in systematic philosophical comprehension.

Identity of Thought and Being: This principle establishes that the underlying rational structure that organizes human thought (Logic) is identical to the rational structure that organizes objective reality (Metaphysics). Knowledge is possible because the mind's internal concepts correspond precisely to the external world's inherent rationality.

The Unity of Subject and Object: This concept directly addresses the insight contained in the original source material. It signifies that the subjective mind (the knower) and the objective world (the known) are unified within the overarching life of the Absolute. Their apparent separation is a temporary, necessary condition that allows consciousness to reflect upon and understand itself in relation to an externalized world, ultimately overcoming this separation through self-knowledge.

Sublation (Aufhebung): A critical term in the dialectic, *Aufhebung* means simultaneously to cancel, preserve, and lift up. When a concept or historical stage is sublated, it is destroyed in its current form, but its essential truth is preserved and elevated into a higher, more comprehensive synthesis. This mechanism explains how the Absolute progresses without losing the achievements of previous stages.

5. Variants and Related Thinkers

While Hegel's system is definitive for Absolute Idealism, it exists within the broader tradition of **Idealism**. The source material correctly notes that other figures, such as **George Berkeley**, advanced influential theories of idealism. Berkeley (1685-1753) was the key proponent of **Subjective Idealism** or Immaterialism, encapsulated in the motto *esse est percipi* ("to be is to be perceived"). Berkeley argued that physical objects exist only as ideas in a perceiving mind, either a finite human mind or the infinite mind of God. His goal was primarily epistemological--to deny the existence of material substance and counter skepticism.

The crucial difference between Berkeley and Hegel lies in the nature of the mind central to the

system. Berkeley's idealism relies on individual perception and divine guarantee, lacking the systematic, historical, and logical structure of Hegel's Absolute. Hegel's *Geist* is not merely a perceiver, but an evolving, all-encompassing rational entity whose self-development explains the entire sweep of human history, culture, and social organization.

Following Hegel, Absolute Idealism enjoyed immense influence in the English-speaking world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, giving rise to **British Idealism**. Major proponents included **F. H. Bradley**, whose *Appearance and Reality* (1893) famously argued for the unreality of finite experience and the cohesive nature of the Absolute, and **T. H. Green**, who applied idealist metaphysics to ethical and political theory, emphasizing the social nature of individual freedom. These idealist schools demonstrated the enduring power of Hegel's framework to provide a foundation for understanding ethics, metaphysics, and social organization.

6. Significance and Legacy

The philosophical significance of Absolute Idealism is profound, shaping virtually every subsequent movement in continental philosophy. Hegel's insistence that history is a rational, unfolding process toward self-awareness laid the foundation for modern **historicism** and theories of historical progress. Perhaps the most famous legacy is its influence on **Karl Marx**, who adopted and transformed the Hegelian dialectic. Marx inverted the dialectic from an unfolding of Spirit into a **Dialectical Materialism**, arguing that historical contradictions arose not from conceptual struggle, but from material and economic conflicts, particularly those between social classes.

Moreover, Absolute Idealism served as a crucial point of departure for 20th-century thought. Existentialists such as **Søren Kierkegaard** and later figures like **Jean-Paul Sartre** developed their philosophies in direct opposition to the perceived totalitarianism and abstract rationalism of the Hegelian system, seeking to reclaim the importance of individual subjective existence and unmediated freedom over the determined necessity of the Absolute. In political philosophy, Hegel's concepts regarding the state and *Sittlichkeit* (Ethical Life) provided a sophisticated model for understanding the organic relationship between the individual citizen and the community, influencing subsequent liberal and conservative political thought.

Despite its decline in Anglo-American academia following the rise of **analytic philosophy**--which largely defined itself through rejecting idealist metaphysics and embracing formal logic and linguistic clarity--Hegel's foundational insights into the nature of recognition, the philosophy of history, and the structure of human freedom ensure the continued relevance of Absolute Idealism as a high-water mark of systematic philosophical ambition.

7. Criticisms and Limitations

Absolute Idealism has historically attracted vigorous criticism, often targeting its comprehensive

scope, logical complexities, and ultimate metaphysical conclusions. A primary critique, advanced by realists and pluralists, focuses on Hegel's pervasive **monism**. Critics argue that by merging all reality into a single, unified Absolute, the system effectively dissolves the genuine reality of finite individuals, specific objects, and contingent events. This alleged reductionism compromises the objective truth of difference and makes true individual freedom seem illusory, subjugated to the rational necessity of the whole.

The Hegelian assertion that "the real is rational" is frequently challenged by both empirical observation and moral philosophy. Critics contend that reality is saturated with irrationality, contingency, and suffering that cannot be seamlessly integrated into a necessary, rational progression. Furthermore, the systematic nature of the dialectic has been accused of methodological arbitrariness, suggesting that Hegel forces historical and conceptual development into the neat thesis-antithesis-synthesis structure, overlooking genuine logical gaps or empirical anomalies.

The early 20th-century founders of analytic philosophy, including **Bertrand Russell** and **G. E. Moore**, launched a powerful offensive against Idealism, labeling the concept of the Absolute and the expansive Hegelian vocabulary as speculative metaphysics and obscure rhetoric. They argued that the philosophy lacked the clarity and logical rigor required for genuine philosophical progress, preferring instead to focus on the analysis of language and the concrete reality of discrete facts, leading to the virtual collapse of idealist dominance in large parts of the philosophical world.

8. Further Reading

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#)

[Encyclopædia Britannica: Absolute Idealism](#)

[Wikipedia: Absolute Idealism](#)

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: George Berkeley](#)