Kant and the Enlightenment

Kant is a pivotal figure in the development of the Enlightenment as well as post-Enlightenment thought. He was in many ways the culminating figure of the Enlightenment and all subsequent philosophy was in some sense a development from or a reaction to Kant. He is respected as a major figure by later philosophers in both analytic and continental traditions.

His philosophy was an attempt to save the Enlightenment from Hume’s skepticism which threatened to pull the rug out from under:
- The confidence in reason—true knowledge of reality is possible
- The confidence in science—as revealing true knowledge of reality
- The confidence in the progress of mankind—founded on the confidence in reason and science

Kant’s solution would involve an attempt to solve the conflict between Rationalism and Empiricism—a schism that threatened to tear apart Enlightenment confidence in dividing philosophers into two seemingly irreconcilable camps.

Empiricists held that all worthwhile knowledge is a posteriori, something that can only be gained through experience. Rationalists maintained that important, perhaps the most important, knowledge is available a priori, independent or prior to any experience.

Kant sought to combine the insights of both traditions. The Rationalists were right that there are important a priori truths, but the Empiricists were also right that much of our knowledge depends upon experience. The Rationalists missed the importance of experience in providing the content of knowledge. The Empiricists missed the importance of the ‘formal’ contribution the mind makes to the empirical ‘content’ it receives from sensation or ‘intuition.’ The structure or form of experience is provided by the mind or ‘understanding’ experience is not possible at all without the form contributed by the mind as Kant famously put it in The Critique of Pure Reason: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”

Experience is thus made up of a combination of ‘thoughts’ or concepts which contribute the form of experience (and are a priori) and ‘intuitions’ which contribute the content.

Kant referred to this solution as something of a “Copernican revolution” in philosophy instead of looking outside the mind to find the grounds for objective knowledge. Kant’s transcendental idealism looks inward to the mind’s role in structuring experience. Objective knowledge is not found by discovering the world as it is ‘in itself’ but rather by demonstrating the necessary, thus universal, structure of human experience for Kant, transcendental knowledge of the structure of experience entails the possibility of synthetic a priori truths.

There is thus important knowledge of the structure of experience independent of or prior to all experience. Kant’s term ‘transcendental idealism’ is often misunderstood, usually idealism is associated with the belief that there is no external, material reality.
there are only ideas
empiricism leads easily to this conclusion
if all our knowledge of the external world comes to us through sensation
in the ideas in the mind

how do we know that anything outside the mind corresponds to these ideas in the mind?

_Sceptical_ idealists maintain that we can have no certain knowledge of an external world
_Dogmatic_ idealists go one step further in claiming that reality is essentially mental
in its contemporary version:
all statements about reality are really statements about ‘sense data’

Kant’s transcendental idealism has often been misunderstood
as a version of idealism in this sense
Kant conceived transcendental idealism as a refutation of ‘empirical idealism’
the world as it appears to us—the phenomenal world—
is inevitably experienced as a material world of causally interacting objects in space and time
we cannot know the world as it is ‘in itself’—the noumenal world
but that does not mean that we have knowledge only of the contents of our minds
or that there is no basis for a distinction between appearance and reality
yet this distinction is maintained _within_ the ‘world of appearances’

the conception leading to scepticism and empirical idealism
is transcendental realism—the view that the appearances appear to us as things in themselves
that is, without any influence from the mind
the view which assumes the mind as a passive mirror of nature
the view which assumes human knowledge could approximate divine intuition
that a totally objective, God’s eye point of view or reality can be obtained
for Kant we have to understand human knowledge in human terms
we have to recognize the role the human mind plays in structuring our experience of the world

in the second part of _The Critique of Pure Reason_
what Kant calls the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’
Kant shows the numerous paradoxes that result from the transcendental realist view
Kant shows that opposed and seemingly irrefutable metaphysical positions
stem from shared but mistaken assumptions of a transcendently realist kind

the most difficult and perhaps most controversial part of _The Critique of Pure Reason_
is the ‘transcendental deduction’ of the categories
Kant’s attempt to prove the necessary, and thus universal, structure of our experience
the transcendental deduction aims to establish
the necessity of the basic features of our experience
it is designed to establish the necessity of space and time as forms of intuition
and the necessity of the ‘pure concepts of the understanding’

mainstream analytic philosophy regards the transcendental deduction to have failed
as arguments, they are either unconvincing
or can be reduced to analytical claims of no great significance
thus there are no synthetic _a priori_ truths
Analytic philosophy sets out from an austere interpretation of Kant’s critical philosophy
finding the limits to traditional metaphysics in his critical philosophy
to close off all further ‘speculation’ about such matters
in effect going back to Hume
and his claim that there are only analytic *a priori* and synthetic *a posteriori* truths  
philosophy should thus simply ignore thus questions that it is not able to answer

the continental tradition places greater emphasis on Kant’s recognition that there are nevertheless metaphysical, moral and aesthetic questions that we are unable to ignore

crucial for Kant is the distinction between  
‘understanding’ (*Verstand*) and ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*)  
the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Vernunft*) establishes the limits of ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*)  
what he means by ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*) is purely theoretical reason  
the method, using both logical deduction and experiment,  
to arrive at certain or the most probable knowledge of the world  
for Kant, philosophical reflection, as an exercise of ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*) necessarily operates beyond the safe but limited confines of ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*)  
by drawing the limits to understanding and scientific reasoning  
Kant hoped to make possible the further reflection of reason on metaphysical, moral and aesthetic questions  
As he put in the *Critique of Pure Reason*  
“I therefore had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (724)

and his famous conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*:  
“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily reflection is occupied with them: *the starry heaven above me and the moral law with me.*”

Subsequent continental philosophy paces greater value on philosophical reason as opposed to mere ‘understanding’

for the continental tradition, the second and third critiques play a greater role  
Kant was certainly aware that Enlightenment philosophy created a serious problem for morality and religion  
a purely mechanistic view of the world seems to undermine notions of freedom and responsibility  
it is not obvious at all how the scientific rationality of the Enlightenment can support moral principles at all  
any basis for objective moral evaluation seems to be undermined  
but in drawing the limits to scientific rationality  
Kant hoped to make room for faith as well as philosophical reflection on metaphysics, morality and aesthetics

thus Kant’s turn to practical reason  
if we examine the transcendental conditions of our practical experience  
if we regard morality as a fact of our existence  
then what are the necessary conditions for its possibility?

This leads Kant to posit the freedom of the noumenal self  
freedom is an essential feature of the way we understand ourselves as self-conscious persons  
for Kant this means that free or moral actions must be purified of ‘empirical’ motivations  
the desires and impulses of particular individuals (the phenomenal self)
the synthetic a priori principles of morality are thus derived
from the abstract notion of a rational will or agent
this leads then to the categorical imperative

Kant’s third critique, the *Critique of Judgment*
is sometimes thought to be a bridge between the other two
or rather, the bridge between the realms of necessity and freedom
which were the focus of the other two critiques

our aesthetic experience of natural beauty delivers an awareness of the meaningfulness
or purposiveness of nature
our aesthetic appreciation of nature
makes is seem *as if* nature were created or designed for some purpose
makes it easier to reconcile the uncompromising demands of morality
with the factual difference of the material world

other thinkers followed Kant in suggesting the aesthetic as the bridge between
nature and morality, necessity and freedom
Friedrich Schiller “On the Aesthetic Education of Man”
sees art as the means to the recovery of
a harmonious, organic unity for humanity
beauty is the path to freedom....

**Critics of the Enlightenment**
of course the intellectual and cultural movement of the Enlightenment
did not develop without opposition
religious conservatives condemned the ‘free thinkers’ of the Enlightenment as
atheists and corrupters of society
these critics sought to halt the Enlightenment and turn back to old order

other critics, however, appreciated the Enlightenment critique of
superstition, dogma and authority
they did not wish to turn back to the past
but they also saw dangers in the quickening tide of modernity

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)
a complex even contradictory figure
exerted a considerable influence on Kant
especially his moral philosophy and his conception of autonomy
but he was also critical of some trends in the development of modernity
and thus influenced much of the subsequent critique of the Enlightenment

Rousseau achieved his initial fame for his critique of modernity and civilized man
and his depiction of the ‘noble savage’ in the early essays
*Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*
this ‘noble savage’ or natural man is depicted as healthy and vigorous
without need of morality and modern civilization
Rousseau characterization of civilized man:
Civilised man, on the other hand, is always moving, sweating, toiling, and racking his brains to find still more laborious occupations: he goes on in drudgery to his last moment, and even seeks death to put himself in a position to live, or renounces life to acquire immortality. He pays his court to men in power, whom he hates, and to the wealthy, whom he despises; he stops at nothing to have the honour of serving them; he is not ashamed to value himself on his own meanness and their protection; and, proud of his slavery, he speaks with disdain of those, who have not the honour of sharing it. *(Discourse on the Origin of Inequality)*

one might consider that the year of Rousseau’s death is the year James Cook became the first European to visit Hawaii how might one compare the life of the average citizen in London and Paris to that of the Hawaiians before the arrival of Cook? While Europeans were colonizing and enslaving ‘primitive’ peoples Rousseau celebrated the simpler and healthier existence of the colonized and enslaved peoples for Rousseau the colonized people were enslaved by representatives of a civilization which was itself a form of slavery

Rousseau’s portrayal of the ‘noble savage’ had an influence on the Romantic ideal of returning to nature and an originally good human nature yet Rousseau’s later writings question the assumption of an original human nature whether good or bad Rousseau’s later writings such as his *Social Contract* (1762) suggests that human nature depends upon social, economic and cultural factors Rousseau argues here that the transition from a state of nature to civil society involves a loss of ‘natural liberty’ but this loss is compensated with gains in ‘civil’ and ‘moral liberty’ it is only in society that the individual becomes a responsible moral agent as opposed to a creature of impulse and thus it is only in society that the individual is truly free obedience to a law we prescribe to ourselves is freedom this idea of autonomy, the subjection of will to a rational law of its own making influenced Kant’s conception of morality

Rousseau’s notion of the individual as socially constituted lies at the heart of his controversial notion of the ‘general will’ for Rousseau the sovereignty of the state is derived from the people yet the function of the state is to act in accordance with the ‘general will’ of the citizens the ‘general will’ is not simply the will of the majority the majority may not be aware of what is in the best interests of all thus democratic elections may not be the best way to find out what the general will is the general will may even involve the transformation of the majority will as Rousseau put it the individual can at times “be forced to be free” critics have seen this equation of liberty to subjection to the general will as a step toward totalitarianism Rousseau’s thought was also influential on the French Revolution and many contemporaries saw it as leading to the Terror

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) also emphasized the social constitution of the individual
Herder’s most influential idea is his view that language is not just a vehicle for the expression of ideas; language is, rather, what makes thought possible. Different languages are thus not simply alternative instruments for the expression of the same ideas but rather reveal different ways of thinking and feeling. This not only raises a fundamental problem for translation—suggesting that some things just cannot be translated from one language to another—but also calls into question the idea of a universal human essence, thus undermining the universalist assumptions of human nature in Enlightenment thought. Herder’s views argue for the importance of specific histories of distinct peoples.

Herder’s thought seems even more radical than Rousseau’s. His emphasis on the distinct differences of human languages and cultures tends toward relativism. There is no universal human essence to measure any given culture against; some see this as leading to nihilism. If there is no universal moral standard, then any value can be defended as an essential component of a discrete cultural tradition.

Herder’s ideas also had an influence on the development of romanticism against the dominance of French Enlightenment rationality. German thinkers began to celebrate German culture and language and to emphasize, against the lifeless homogenizing materialism of French thought, the emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic qualities of humanity. The Romantics followed Kant in emphasizing the moral life must be understood in other terms than that provided by natural science. But they were less attracted to Kant’s austere conception of moral autonomy. Goethe’s popular novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) gave expression to this developing Romanticist sentiment.

**Romanticism**

The term is usually applied to certain aspects of European intellectual life in late 18th and early 19th centuries, roughly between 1790-1850. Romanticism took different forms in different countries: Germany, England, France.

August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845) coined the term “Romanticism” in his Vienna lectures of 1809-11. He used it to distinguish “modern” poetry and art from the Classical. For Schlegel, Romantic poetry embodies a striving for the infinite. This striving for the infinite is reflected in the art of Christianity. For Schlegel, this striving is an unsatisfied longing.

Some main features of Romanticism:

1. The universe is a single unified whole. Everything is connected to everything else. (The world is not simply a collection of unrelated atomic particles and isolated minds.)

2. The universe is full of values, tendencies, and life. (The universe is not composed merely of lifeless matter; it is not completely objective, consisting only of the formal mathematical...
properties of matter extended in space and time.)

3. Reason, objectivity, and analysis radically falsify reality by breaking it up into disconnected lifeless entities. The best way of perceiving reality is through some subjective feeling or intuition, through which we participate in the subject of our knowledge instead of viewing it from the outside.

4. art has a preeminent role to play in human life and culture
almost a divination of art—art has a religious significance and role in human society.

Art has a healing role—it leads to a feeling of unity of the human being with nature. The discord between man and nature that is the result of the gap between nature and freedom is replaced by a notion of “organic or aesthetic unity.” Thus, an important motif of Romanticism is that of a "circuitous journey," a move from alienation, through spiritual crisis, to a redemptive reintegration with the cosmos.

There is a revaluation of the relationship between philosophy and art, or art and truth. Philosophy becomes aesthetic—art becomes the “organ of philosophy.”

art thus becomes a source of truth
art has a cognitive status
the faculty of the imagination becomes exalted along with the notion of artistic “genius”

I. Precedents to Romanticism

A) Kant’s Critique of Judgment (1790)

1. Kant maintained the autonomy of aesthetic judgment (as distinguished from the theoretical and the practical). Though Kant did not explicitly demarcate an independent realm of the aesthetic, he was read by later romanticist thinkers to have indeed distinguished the aesthetic as an autonomous realm separated from the realms of nature and freedom. Later romanticist philosophers would develop the notion of the aesthetic as an independent, autonomous realm.

2. Though Kant explicitly denied that art has “truth value” some statements in the Critique of Judgment seemed to contradict this view. For Kant art is a matter of pleasure, not knowledge. He does hint, however, that art can put us into contact with something that cannot be grasped through concepts. Later romanticist philosophers would develop the notion that it is through art that man can reach truth.

3. Kant’s notion of “genius” as the talent that generates “aesthetic ideas” that provide the soul that distinguishes “fine art” had a great influence on the development of romanticism. This conception of “aesthetic genius” as distinguished from the scientific mind greatly influenced romanticism. An “aesthetic idea” is an idea for which no adequate concept can be found, and thus cannot be made intelligible by language. The notion of an “aesthetic idea” thus pointed toward the view of art as expressing the inexpressible. This also suggested that art is something more than mere pleasure.

4. In general the whole Kantian “Copernican Revolution” which suggested the mind is not just a passive mirror of nature, but that the mind imposes form and order upon
experience and thus truth is in some sense both discovered and created.

B) Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

though not a Romanticist, Schiller is the bridge between Kant and Romanticism
he develops and extends Kant’s discussion of the aesthetic
and is the first to take up Kant’s suggestion of a higher role for art
in his Letter of an Aesthetic Education of Man (1794-95)
Schiller puts forth a history of the whole of Western Culture
influenced by Goethe and Johann Joachim Winckelmann
Winckelmann developed an “aesthetic paganism” that influenced all later German thought
emphasized “nobility and simplicity” of Greek life that has never since been realized
nature and human beings dwell together in beauty
there, a moment of “festival and play” occurs
allows human beings to dwell in his or her own beauty
both as living artwork
and as the highest manifestation of nature
Kant insisted this idea was unrealized and unrealizable
Winckelemann believed this ideal was actualized in Periclean Athens

Schiller takes up this exaltation of Greek culture
contrasting it with the fragmentation and alienation of modern man
Schiller is one of the first to take up the idea of modern alienation
this sense of alienation is the result of the gap between nature and freedom
and thus the contradiction between the Enlightenment project
for a science of society (science is based on nature—a realm of necessity)
and its continuing belief in morality (based on freedom)

for Schiller the cure for this alienation lies in art
in contrast to Wincklemann, the ideal “aesthetic society” is not an unrecoverable past
but rather an ideal to which society can progress towards

the aim of Schiller’s aesthetic education is to establish an aesthetic state
in which individual members are harmoniously related in an organic social totality
thus the alienation that results from the gap between nature and freedom is overcome

for Schiller the artist-philosopher is the aesthetic educator who leads humanity to the ideal state
Schiller thus defines the notion of the avant-garde that informs 20th century art

in these Aesthetic Letters, as they are sometimes referred to,
Schiller transforms Kant’s account of aesthetic experience into
an anthropological insight into human nature
conceiving beauty as “our second creatress”
which offers us the “possibility of becoming human beings” (21st letter)
it is through art and aesthetic experience that the human being is fully developed
takes up Kant’s suggestion of the aesthetic as reuniting the realms of nature and freedom

in the 20th letter we see this notion of the aesthetic
as mediating between sensation and thought
necessity and freedom
in the aesthetic state one “does indeed act freely, is in the highest degree free from all compulsion, but is in no wise free from laws” (44). the first to see “aesthetic unity” to be active not only in art but in thought itself

Schiller’s most important notion is the Spieltrieb (play drive) Schiller brings together Kant’s idea of the “free play of the powers of representation” and Fichte’s idea of the drives (Trieb) and develops this notion of the Spieltrieb (play drive)

human experience is suspended between a “sensuous drive” (Sinntrieb) which chains individuals to nature and a “formal impulse” (Formtrieb) which aims to bring harmony into experience if fragmentation is to be overcome and integration achieved neither the rational nor the sensuous side of experience can be repressed the Spieltrieb “sublates” (aufgehobt) the “sensuous drive” and the “form drive”

we see in the 20th letter this distinction between the “sensuous drive” and the “form-impulse” (43) one passes from sensation to thought through a “middle disposition” (44) this middle disposition will later be developed as the Spieltrieb

according to Schiller it is in art that this play drive emerges only in the play of art are the sensuous drive and the formal drive brought together only in contemplating the beautiful is man harmonized only here does man find a happy medium between the moral law (freedom) and physical exigency (necessity)

beauty offers an instance of moral freedom being compatible with sense it leads the sensuous man back to form and thought and the spiritual man back to the world of sense

this idea that human beings reach their fullest potential when ‘playing’ with beauty is Schiller’s unique contribution it develops the Kantian notion of an aesthetic attitude as detachment from practical or intellectual concerns

Schiller argues that aesthetic sensibility is essential for a liberal society he follows Kant in treating art as a matter of Schein (semblance or illusion) and not truth thus adhering to Kant’s distinction between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic Kant’s insistence on the autonomy of aesthetic judgment led him to deny that art has “truth value” for Schiller, we are drawn to the “free play” of art, not by any supposed revelation of truth this is what separates both Schiller and Kant from the later Romantics

in 26th letter, makes a distinction between “logical semblance” which is deception or illusion and “aesthetic semblance” which is play in aesthetic semblance we distinguish between semblance and truth and love semblance because it is semblance

though Schiller did not see art as a source of truth his Aesthetic Letters were read by younger thinkers to suggest that art could be a source of truth and thus opens the doors to Romanticism
C) Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854)

Schelling transposes Schiller’s utopian idealism into an absolute idealism in which beauty actually constitutes the original essence of reality

in a manner similar to Kant’s Third Critique
Schelling constructs a transcendental idealism to bridge the gap between nature and reason

*The Philosophy of Art* (1802-3) attempts a systematic philosophical articulation of the arts forms a crucial chapter in post-Kantian idealism plays a significant role in the emergence of the aesthetic that informs modernism

in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) Schelling saw art as the ‘organ of philosophy’ for it can see what philosophical concepts cannot: the *absolute*
with this Schelling thus turns philosophy in an aesthetic direction
this notion of art as the ‘organ of philosophy’
art as the means to get to truth
art has truth status
becomes one of the foundational elements of Romanticism in art and philosophy

Schelling contends that nature and the work of art are the product of one and the same activity an activity that is in its essence aesthetic
the only difference between the world and the work of art is that in the former the creative activity is unconscious, whereas in the latter it is conscious

As Schelling put it:
“the objective world is only the original, still unconscious poetry of the spirit”
given his conviction that reality is poetic
it is not surprising that he sees philosophy culminating in art
only art can make objective what the philosopher represents in thought
thus philosophy, after completing its task of representation
must return to “the universal ocean of poetry from which it started out”

Hegel (1770-1831)
as a young man Hegel was an ardent Romanticist
in college he was a roommate with Schelling and Hölderlin
his mature philosophy shows a Romanticist influence and yet he breaks with Romanticism in turning to reason and philosophy rather than art as a source of knowledge attempts synthesis of Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment themes
influenced by Rousseau and Herder, Goethe, Hölderlin, as well as Kant

Hegel followed Kant in accepting that reason gives us knowledge of the *Phenomenal World* the world as it appears as a phenomenon in consciousness
however, he rejects Kant’s assumption (shared by the prior tradition) of a *Noumenal World* a world as it is in-itself apart from how it appears in human consciousness
in other words, the world just is as it appears as a phenomenon of human consciousness
there simply is no point of talking about a world as it is in-itself
thus Hegel’s is a “holistic worldview in which consciousness and the world are not separate but
inseparably integrated” (Solomon, 291)

at first glance this might seem to imply the most pernicious relativism
in which the world is radically different for different human consciousnesses
with no way of evaluating one worldview as better than another

but for Hegel all individual consciousnesses are a manifestation of the Absolute—Spirit or Mind
realizing itself through human consciousness
his masterpiece, *die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807)
translated as *Phenomenology of Spirit* or *Phenomenology of Mind*
traces the development of a process of Self-realization of *Geistes* through human consciousness

in the *Phenomenology* Hegel proposes to begin from a position without presuppositions
to examine consciousness from the inside as it appears to itself
a phenomenology of *Geistes* is an exposition of knowledge as a *phenomenon* as it actually
appears in consciousness
(the word “phenomenon” is etymologically connected to the word “appearance”)

Hegel thus “suggests that we give up the view that the self is essentially a feature of the
individual: the self—or ‘Spirit’—is shared by all of us” (Solomon, 291)
we all participate in the unfolding of Spirit through history
thus Hegel’s philosophy is an all-encompassing system which “sought to relate and unify man
and nature, spirit and matter, human and divine, time and eternity” (Tarnas, 379)

Hegel referred to his philosophy as an “Absolute Idealism”
in contrast to Kant’s “Transcendental Idealism”
reality, for Hegel, is simply the product of this Absolute Spirit moving through history
the development of human history then is regarded as a series of successive stages of Spirit’s
journey toward Self-realization
thus any particular worldview is not just as valid as any other (relativism)
any particular worldview is thus measured by its place in history, its place in the development of
Spirit’s Self-realization
“The way we view the world is already determined by our place in history, our language, and our
society” (Solomon, 292)

each worldview thus emerges within a particular historical context
at a particular stage in Spirit’s journey through history
there is the sense that all views or forms of consciousness are “all moving toward some final
end—the correct view” (Solomon, 292)

Hegel thought he understood how the process of history worked
his famous account of this process is called the “dialectic” of history
“dialectic” is etymologically related to the word “dialogue”
in Plato we have the “dialectic” as a process of dialogue
“a conversation between two people who, starting from opposing perspectives on an issue,
eventually arrive at a position that preserves the insights of each” (Guignon & Pereboom, 3)
Hegel’s dialectic develops according to a three stage pattern
from thesis to antithesis to synthesis
first there is a thesis
the next stage emerges as a negation of the thesis and is thus the antithesis
the next stage is a negation of the negation leading to a synthesis
this synthesis involves a special double movement of both canceling and uniting
Hegel uses the verb aufheben which has this double meaning in German
“it signifies conserving, preserving, and at the same time also making cease, making an end” (Hegel, 181)
when something is aufgehoben it is both cancelled and preserved
“Something is aufgehoben only insofar as it has entered into a union with its opposite” (Hegel, 181)
thus in the final stage of the dialectic the original thesis and its antithesis are aufgehoben
they are negated or cancelled but then also preserved in a higher unity

the resulting synthesis can then be a new thesis for further development
history thus moves in an ascending spiral
eventually reaching a standpoint of “absolute knowing”

Hegel thus “shows how consciousness evolves through a series of transformations towards
increasingly developed forms. Each form of consciousness (like each stage of history) contain
tensions or contradictions which render it incomplete and unstable, so that it is ultimately bound
to give way dialectically to more adequate forms” (West, 39)
the scope of Hegel’s task is immense to say the least
he “manages to compress the history of morality, art, religion and philosophy into the stages of
his phenomenology of mind” (West, 39)

Hegel thought the process of history was a rational process
with each stage a further step forward in a rational process
until at the end the Absolute is reached
at this Absolute standpoint reality is conceived as maximally rational
reality becomes the maximally rational
for Hegel the rational is the real and the real is the rational
thus, for Hegel, “Reason governs the world and has consequently governed its history” (Solomon, 299)
Hegel thought the dialectic of spirit culminates in his own philosophy
in his philosophy spirit comes to the fullest and most fully rational self-consciousness
a self-consciousness equivalent to the highest possible realization of freedom
you know you are at the end when you’ve reached a stage of consciousness without any further
internal contradictions—where knowledge is no longer compelled to go beyond itself
and in his philosophy he thought that consciousness had come to this absolute standpoint

perhaps the most famous example of the dialectical process in the Phenomenology
is the development of spirit through stages of political organization
thesis: the family—here individuals all know their place, and act for the benefit of the whole
family which is governed by the rule of the father
antithesis: the individual—here individuals break from the family and seek their own
individual interests (capitalist society)
synthesis: the state—here individuals realize the futility of radical individualism and return to
a kind of family again, this time the state which considers the interest of the collective over
that of the individual

The influence of Hegel upon Marx was of course significant. Marx just threw out the Hegelian idea that the process of history was a development of spirit. Marx’s philosophy was thus a “dialectical materialism.”
The communist state was the final stage in the political development of history.

Hegel (and Marx) arrogantly claimed to stand at the end of this process of history in a sense thus claiming to know which way history was to develop. Much of the reaction against Hegelianism in the later half of the 19th century was a reaction against the arrogance of this absolutism.

The lasting influence of Hegel is his historical approach to philosophy. Here truth itself becomes historical, a process rather than a static correspondence to something unchanging.

As Solomon puts it: “Truth is not, as many philosophers had insisted ever since ancient times, what is. Truth develops, as the human mind develops. Truth is not being but becoming.” (Solomon, 292)

***A note on these lecture notes: these notes are partly my own summaries and partly taken from the following sources:


West, David. An Introduction to Con