

Understanding Spirituality and World Philosophy: Beyond Hegel

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Philosophers today understand a long history of 'spirituality' in deep thought -- thought both analytical and phenomenological. 'Spirit' is a vague term and gains meaning through the array of philosophies --East and West -- available in the marketplace of ideas and practice.

While scholars might be accused of lacking practical skills, the practitioners often fail to understand the width and depth of their own potential belief scoping. And there are dangers. The greater the belief system, the greater the faults.

Nevertheless, the intellectual-spiritual adventure is necessary for identity. Inclusiveness is important and valuable but choices for identity also excludes, otherwise there is no identity. What is it that we wish to include and exclude in thinking about 'Spirit'? Hegel gave modernity a start in understanding the widest scoping, but his system has many faults.

1. What is Spirit?

There are two ways to answer this question. First, we take an ancient pathway and think of spirit as a kind of being, animating force within all living things. This is a [folk belief](#). What this ontology does is identify substantial entities as beings – a demon, ghost, fairy, or angel, as a [supernatural being](#), or [non-physical entity](#).

Technically, a non-physical entity is [abstract conception](#) with its [ontological](#) status indetermined. Here we come to the second way to answer the question of what is spirit? Rather than resolve the question of being, we might say, when we speak of 'spirit', we speak a [category](#) or a name. It might be an unknown category of being or it might be merely something we say unknowingly without ontological status. The full-blown name for this approach is [Nominalism](#). The category is the belief system of those who deny the existence of [universals](#) and abstract objects but affirms the existence of general or abstract terms and [predicates](#).

Those who speak from the first camp are committed to a [Literalism](#), even as it is argued, in this camp, that the commonly understood metaphor is spoken and it must be interpreted by ancient tradition. They are usually universalists who reject Nominalism, which, in this case, are nominalists who are [liberal](#) readers and reject the literalism for the ancient names. Religious liberalism rejects the confines of a literal reading and seek a broader reading of universality in an abstract idea. Here [Unitarian-Universalism](#) has a big problem. It has adopted two traditions of belief. Religious liberals do not understand 'spirit' as anything literal. Those who speak from the second camp are committed to [Hermeneutics](#). Meaning or [semantics](#) is what is important. They see those in the first camp as entangled in their *particular* understanding of the universals, missing either the concrete or abstractions in the worship of the Absolute Universality. The first camp reject that critique, replacing the second camp's argument with the affirmation of the [intuitiveness](#) of the [Divine One](#).

How did we get to this place, to camp one and camp two? The answer is [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel](#) (1770-1831). Even as we reject Hegel's belief system, everyone in this argument is using the modern meaning from Hegel for Spirit ([Geist](#)), Universality, Reason and Intuition. Even to argued against Hegel's technical terms we do need to understand the difference between the modern meaning and the alternatives.

So, understanding Geist is critical for understanding talk of [spirituality](#). The German noun well predates Hegel's philosophy, and to take up the English translation we are face with the options of [ghost](#), spirit, [mind](#), [intellect](#). You immediately see the challenge. For translators who are regarding Hegel's [Geist](#) more closely, it immediately becomes 'spirit/mind' or 'spirit (mind)'. Obviously, it is not clear, with the same two options we have been considering in the two camps. However, greater clarity comes from considering Hegel's larger philosophic schema, in particularly his [philosophy of history](#). Here the universal spirit is the Absolute, a oneness with history, a universal history with the stages of a universal consciousness, which becomes the providential accumulation of human history, in a progression of a logical [three-ness](#) of [Thesis](#), [Antithesis](#), and [Synthesis](#).

Spirit is the determinate movement to the conclusion of [history](#), and perhaps, taken as an [existentialist thesis](#), it is the meaning of [death](#), the end of [personal history](#). Katharine Graham used that term, [personal history](#), to deal with her husband's mental illness and the challenges she faced in a male-dominated working environment. Your friend, Neville, uses the concept of personal history in [The History of Ruth](#). Here, still after four years, tears of grief well-up in my eyes, tears flowing down my cheeks.

Although it can be very much said that Hegel go wrong in his [statist objectification](#) and [rationalism](#), there is so much of [passion](#), [love](#), [life purpose](#), [personhood](#), in his [Holy Idea](#) of Geist.

2. What is our Method?

This 21st century understanding of [consciousness](#) and [Hegelian methodology](#) has opened up our understanding of spirituality.

However, what we have covered so far only touches the surface of exploring spirituality. And it is not a pure intellectual enterprise. There is a skewed way of [thinking](#) in presuming the intellect is impractical. So the first question to follow is how [practical](#) is the [notion](#) of Geist?

With this question and those following, there is no time for the effort for what would be another five full essays. You are not paying me enough to do that work. However, we might come to an informative discussion if we consider a series of quotes from Hegel as something of an answer for these questions.

3. How Practical is Spirit?

From the *Lectures on the History of History*, Volume 1, John Sibree translation (1857), 1914, p. 40-41:

- Passion is that which sets men in activity, that which effects "practical" realization. The Idea is the inner spring of action; the State is the actually existing, realized moral life. For it is the Unity of the universal, essential Will, with that of the individual; and this is "Morality."

From the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History, Volume 2*, ES Haldane and Francis H. Simson translation (1837), 1894, p. 181:

- Aristotle (De Anima, I. 1) makes in the first place the general remark that it appears as if the soul must, on the one hand, be regarded in its freedom as independent and as separable from the body, since in thinking it is independent; and, on the other hand, since in the emotions it appears to be united with the body and not separate, it must also be looked on as being inseparable from it; for the emotions show themselves as materialized Notions (*λόγοι έννοια*), as material modes of what is spiritual. With this a twofold method of considering the soul, also known to Aristotle, comes into play, namely the purely rational or logical view, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the physical or physiological; these we still see **practiced side by side....**

4. How Universal is Spirit?

From the *Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal*, composed 1799, published posthumously [English: *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*]:

- The inclination to act as the laws command, a virtue, is a synthesis in which the law ... loses its universality and the subject its particularity; both lose their opposition, while in the [Kantian](#) conception of virtue this opposition remains, and **the universal becomes the master and the particular the mastered.**
- In the “fulfillment” of both the laws and duty, ... the moral disposition ceases to be the universal, opposed to inclination, and inclination ceases to be particular, opposed to the law.
- A command can express no more than an ought or a shall, because it is a universal, but it does not express an ‘is’; and this at once makes plain its deficiency. Against such commands Jesus sets virtue, i.e., a loving disposition, which makes the content of the command superfluous and destroys its form as a command, because that form implies an opposition between a commander and something resisting the command.

From the *Jede Vorstellung ist eine Verallgemeinerung, und diese gehört dem Denken an. Etwas allgemein machen, heißt, es denken.* ("Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse", Berlin, 1833, p. 35):

- "Any idea is a universalization, and universalizing is a property of thinking. To universalize something means to think."

From the *Lectures on the History of History*, Volume 1, John Sibree translation (1857), 1914, p. 17:

- The nature of Spirit may be understood by a glance at its direct opposite Matter. As the essence of Matter is Gravity, so, on the other hand, we may affirm that the substance, the essence of Spirit is Freedom. All will readily assent to the doctrine that Spirit, among other properties, is also endowed with Freedom; but philosophy teaches that all the qualities of Spirit exist only through Freedom ; that all are but means for attaining Freedom ; that all seek and produce this and this alone. It is a result of speculative Philosophy, that Freedom is the sole truth of Spirit. Matter possesses gravity in virtue of its tendency towards a central point. It is essentially composite; consisting of parts that exclude each other. It seeks its Unity; and therefore exhibits itself as self- destructive, as verging towards its opposite [an indivisible point]. If it could attain this, it would be Matter no longer, it would have perished. It strives after the realization of its Idea; for in Unity it exists ideally. **Spirit, on the contrary, may be defined as that which has its center in itself. It has not a unity outside itself, but has already found it; it exists in and with itself. Matter has its essence out of itself; Spirit is self-contained existence (*Bei-sich-selbst-seyn*). Now this is Freedom, exactly. *For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness consciousness of one's own being. Two things must be distinguished in consciousness; first, the fact that I know; secondly, what I know. In self-consciousness these are merged in one; for Spirit knows itself.* It involves an appreciation of its own nature, as also an energy enabling it to realise itself; to make itself actually that which it is potentially.**

From the *Lectures on the History of History*, Volume 1, John Sibree translation (1857), 1914, pp. 58-59:

- **Universal History** exhibits the gradation in the development of that principle whose substantial purport is **the consciousness of Freedom**. The analysis of the successive grades, in their abstract form, belongs to *Logic*; in their concrete aspect to the *Philosophy of Spirit*. Here it is sufficient to state that the first step in the process presents that immersion of Spirit in Nature which has been already referred to ; the second shows it as advancing to the consciousness of its freedom. But this initial separation from Nature is imperfect and partial, since it is derived immediately from the merely natural state, is consequently related to it, and is still encumbered with it as an essentially connected element. The third step is the elevation of the soul from this still limited and special form of freedom to its pure universal form ; that state in which the spiritual essence attains the consciousness and feeling of itself. These grades are the ground-principles of the general process; but how each of them on the other hand involves within itself a process of formation, constituting the links in a dialectic of transition, to particularise this must be preserved for the sequel. Here we have only to indicate that Spirit begins with a germ of infinite possibility, but only possibility, containing its substantial existence in an undeveloped form, as the object and goal which it reaches only in its resultant full reality. **In actual existence Progress appears as an advancing from the imperfect to the more perfect; but the former must not be understood abstractly as only the imperfect, but as something which involves the very opposite of itself the so-called perfect as a germ or impulse. So reflectively, at least possibility points to something destined to become actual; the Aristotelian *δύναμις* also *potentia*, power and might. Thus the Imperfect, as involving its opposite, is a contradiction, which certainly exists, but which is continually annulled and solved; the instinctive movement the inherent impulse in the life of the soul to break through the rind of mere nature, sensuousness, and that which is alien to it, and to attain to the light of consciousness, i. e. to itself.**

5. How Inclusive is Spirit?

From the *Philosophy of Right*, SW Dyde Queen's University Canada translation (1896) p. 114-115:

- The external embodiment of an act is composed of many parts, and may be regarded as capable of being divided into an infinite number of particulars. An act may be looked on as in the first instance coming into contact with only one of these particulars. But **the truth of the particular is the universal**. A definite act is not confined in its content to one isolated point of the varied external world, but is universal, including these varied relations within itself. The purpose, which is the product of thought and embraces not the particular only but also the universal side, is intention.
- **The essence of the modern state is the union of the universal with the full freedom of the particular, and with the welfare of individuals.**
 - Sect. 260

From the *Lectures on the History of History*, Volume 1, John Sibree translation (1857), 1914, p. 17:

- The enquiry into the essential destiny of Reason as far as it is considered in reference to the World is identical with the question, what is the ultimate design of the World? And the expression implies that that design is destined to be realised! Two points of consideration suggest themselves: first, the import of this design its abstract definition; and secondly, its realization. It must be observed at the outset, that the phenomenon we investigate Universal History belongs to the realm of Spirit. The term "World" **includes** both physical and psychical Nature. Physical Nature also plays its part in the World's History, and attention will have to be paid to the fundamental natural relations thus involved. But Spirit, and the course of its development, is our substantial object. **Our task does not require us to contemplate Nature as a Rational System in itself though in its own proper domain it proves itself such but simply in its relation to Spirit.** On the stage on which we are observing it, **Universal History Spirit displays itself in its most concrete reality.** Notwithstanding this (or rather for the very purpose of comprehending the general principles which this, its form of concrete reality, embodies) we must premise some abstract characteristics of the nature of Spirit. Such an explanation, however, cannot be given here under any other form than that of bare assertion. The present is not the occasion for unfolding the idea of Spirit speculatively ; for whatever has a place in an Introduction, must, as already observed, be taken as simply historical ; something assumed as having been explained and proved elsewhere; or whose demonstration awaits the sequel of **the Science of History itself.**

6. How Exclusive is Spirit?

From the *Lectures on the History of History*, Volume 1, John Sibree translation (1857), 1914, p. 18:

- The nature of Spirit may be understood by a glance at its direct opposite Matter. As the essence of Matter is Gravity, so, on the other hand, we may affirm that the substance, the essence of Spirit is Freedom. All will readily assent to the doctrine that Spirit, among other properties, is also endowed with Freedom; but philosophy teaches that all the qualities of Spirit exist only through Freedom ; that all are but means for attaining Freedom ; that all seek and produce this and this alone. It is a result of speculative Philosophy, that Freedom is the sole truth of Spirit. Matter possesses gravity in virtue of its tendency towards a central point. It is essentially composite; consisting of parts that **exclude** each other. It seeks its Unity; and therefore exhibits itself as self- destructive, as verging towards its opposite [an indivisible point]. If it could attain this, it would be Matter no longer, it would have perished. It strives after the realization of its Idea; for in Unity it exists ideally. **Spirit, on the contrary, may be defined as that which has its center in itself. It has not a unity outside itself, but has already found it; it exists in and with itself. Matter has its essence out of itself; Spirit is self-contained existence (*Bei-sich-selbst-seyn*). Now this is Freedom, exactly. *For if I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not; I cannot exist independently of something external. I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself. This self-contained existence of Spirit is none other than self-consciousness consciousness of one's own being. Two things must be distinguished in consciousness; first, the fact that I know; secondly, what I know. In self-consciousness these are merged in one; for Spirit knows itself.* It involves an appreciation of its own nature, as also an energy enabling it to realise itself; to make itself actually that which it is potentially.**

From the *Introduction to Aesthetics* (1842), translated by T. M. Knox, (1979), p. 89:

- [Poetry](#) is the universal [art](#) of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out **exclusively** in the inner [space](#) and the inner [time](#) of ideas and feelings.

Conclusion: What have we learnt of Geist?

From what we have covered there are few lessons we can identify in spirituality:

Spirituality:-

- has analytical and phenomenological dimensions as understanding;
- is understood in both East and West philosophies;
- is either referring to a substantial entities as beings **or** non-physical entity as general or abstract terms and predicates;
- is either literal **or** metaphorical or allegorical;
- is Geist where the intellectual is central for understanding;
- is Existential where the intellectual understanding dwells;
- is of passion, love, life purpose, personhood, in his Holy Idea of Geist;
- is subjected **or** objectified as method;
- is practical;
- is universal;
- is inclusive; and
- exclusive.

Spirituality is ***both/and*** until we find the ***limits*** of what each is conscious.
