

# G. F. W. Hegel

Reading materials for Dr. Kevin Riel's April 17, 2025 philosophy class at La Jolla Country Day School

# Our approach to Hegel

- The scope of Hegel's work is intimidating: World history, the spirit of the ages, the ultimate destination of humanity, a theory of mind, a new form of logic, absolute freedom and absolute knowledge, etc.
  - Hegel's style is daunting as well. His language is dark, hermetic, reclusive. He oscillates between hyper-technical jargon and powerful poetic imagery. Reading Hegel is hard work—but it is rewarding, because as your mind parses Hegel's compressed code, you will think surprising things. You will have flashes of insight into your own philosophy.
- We will focus on three concepts that will help unlock Hegel's system: The **Idea**, which is the foundation of Hegel's philosophy; the **Mind**, which is the entity generating, evolving, and realizing Ideas; and the **Dialectic**, which is the process by which the Mind generates, evolves and realizes Ideas (and itself).

# Idea = Concept + Realization (1)

- When we speak of ideas, we usually mean considered thoughts in our heads. Hegel calls those ideas concepts. For him, an Idea is more than a thought.

“The subject-matter of the philosophical science [] is the Idea [], i.e., the concept [] together with the actualization of that concept.”, PoR, Intro, Para. 1

- For Hegel, humans are creatures that have ideas *and* realize them in the world. As we change the world by realizing our ideas, the world changes us.
- Ideas are often (1) incomplete and (2) unintelligible until we realize them. Conceptual flaws in an idea often reveal themselves only in the expression of the idea. For example:
  - I have a vague idea for a class on Hegel. I sit down and prepare slides (= realize the idea), and in the process of doing so, my thoughts become clearer. As I type this deck (many drafts later), I finally have a decent idea of what I want to talk about.
  - An engineer designs (= concept) and builds a bridge (= realization). The bridge looks great but collapses after a month, because the load calculations were wrong (= flawed idea).

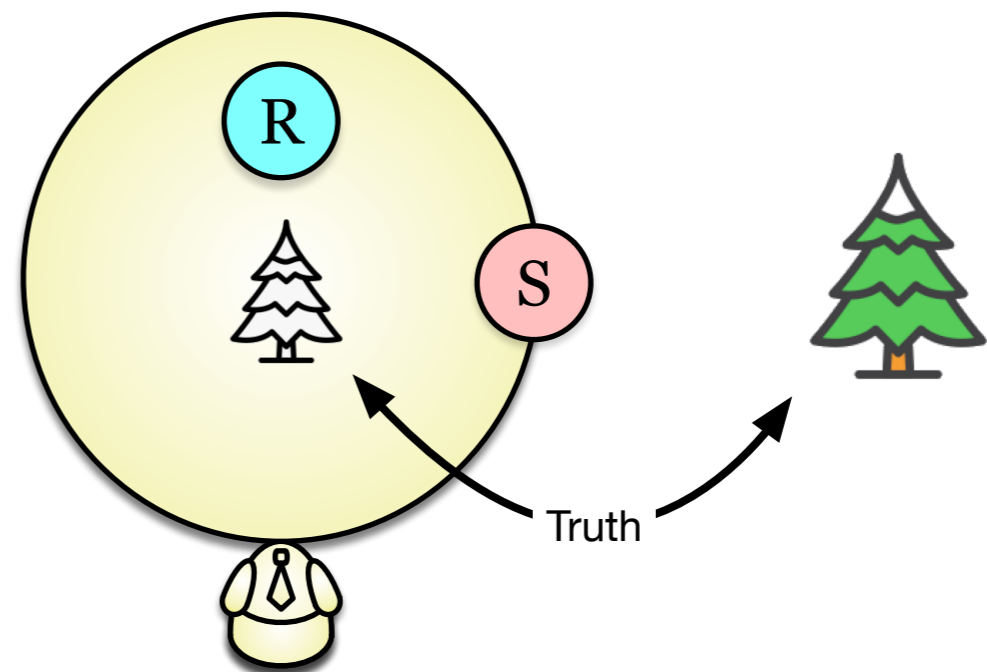
# Interlude: Wait, what?

- “Idea = concept + realization”
- First, that’s an awkward use of the term “idea.” Second, it doesn’t sound particularly insightful. Of course I have some kind of plan before I start writing a paper or bake a cake. Why is that a big deal?
- To answer that question, let’s briefly revisit some of the history of epistemology and metaphysics that you have been studying this year.
- We’ll sketch out (1) empiricism, (2) idealism, (3) skepticism, (4) transcendental idealism, and finally Hegel’s (5) absolute idealism reflected in the  $I = c + r$  formula.

# Epistemology and Metaphysics

- Epistemology is the theory of knowledge: What can we know?
- Metaphysics is the theory of reality: What is really out there?
- In a world saturated with opinion, partisanship, disinformation, loss of trust in science, etc., truth is an endangered species. But without truth, we are lost. Without truth, there is no civilization. Without truth, all that's left is power.
- That's why answers to questions of epistemology and metaphysics are a big deal.
- On the next few slides, we'll use variants of the drawing below to recap the main approaches to epistemology and metaphysics.

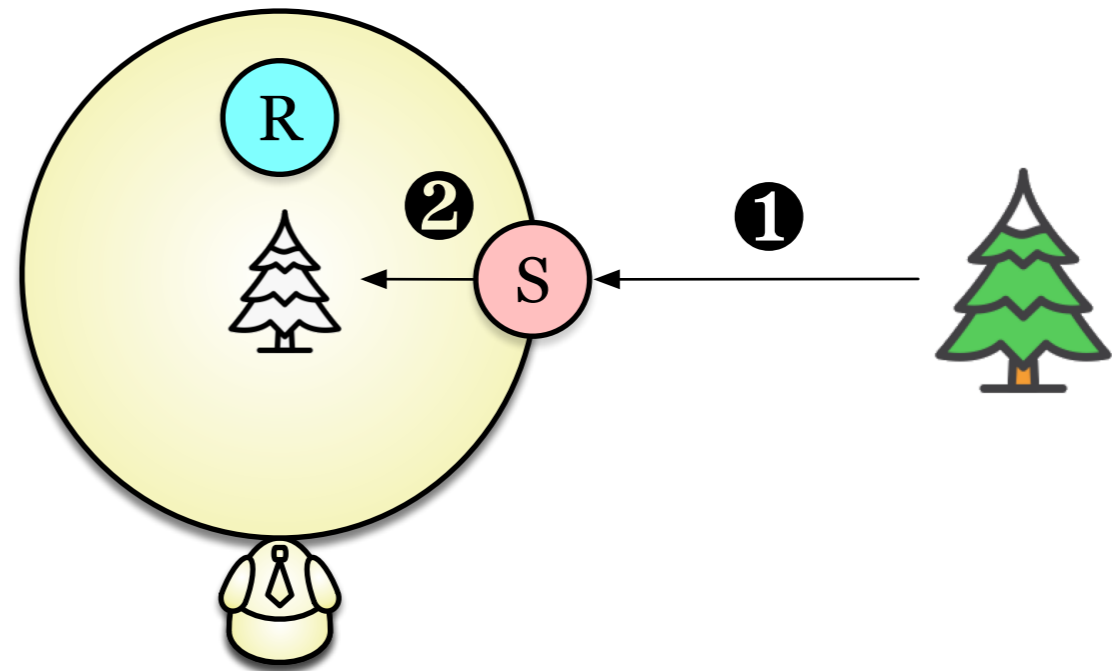
- Inside the big head in the drawing is the sphere of subjectivity (the mind).
- Outside the big head is reality with real-world objects in it (the tree).
- The outlined tree in the head is a belief about the tree in the real world.
- If the belief corresponds to the object, then we have attained truth about the real world.(\*)
- Humans have two major faculties to learn about the world: our five senses (S) and our ability to reason (R).



\* We'll ignore further technical knowledge requirements for our purposes here.

# Empiricism

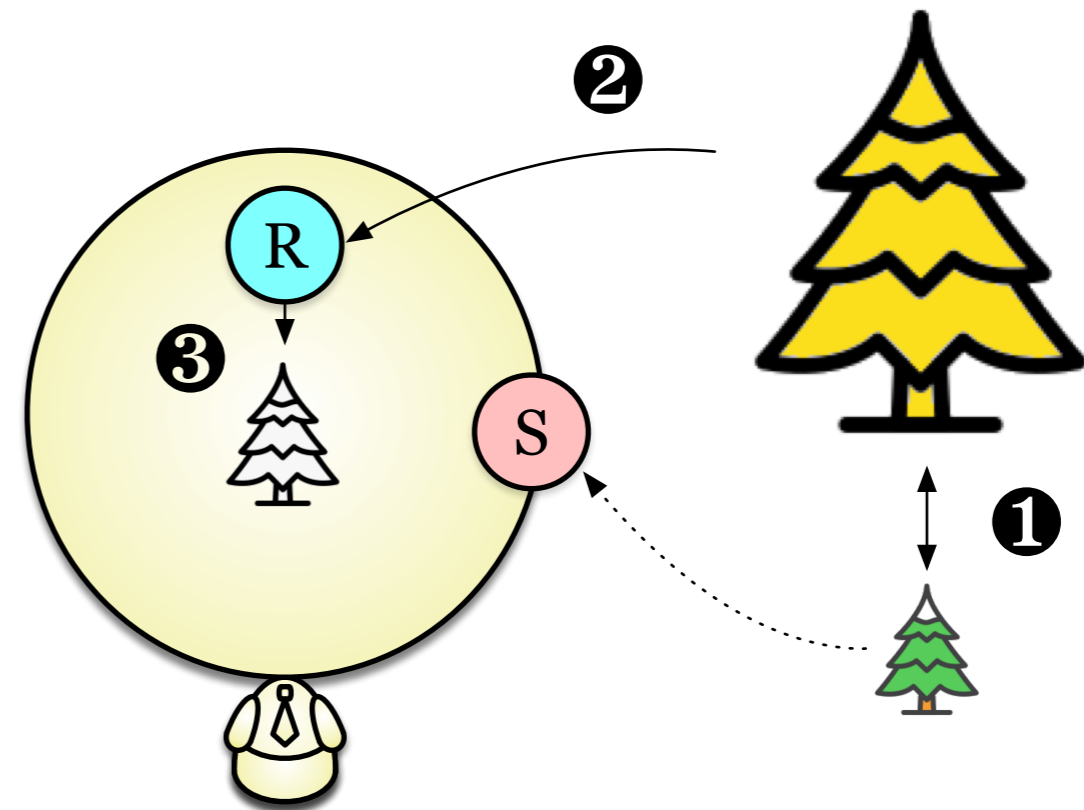
- The tree in the real world informs our senses. ①
- Our senses report an accurate image of the tree to our mind, which forms our belief about the tree outside. ②



- The tree, via our senses, causes us to have a belief about it in our minds. ②
- If we make proper use of our senses, observe carefully, and conduct rigorous experiments, then our belief about the tree will correspond to (= faithfully represent) the tree in the real world with respect to the features under investigation.
- Truth is the correspondence of our beliefs about the features of the tree in our minds with the features of the tree in the real world. Falsehood is a divergence of belief and reality.
- Note that reason plays a role as well, e.g., in analyzing our belief about the trees, planning further experiments, etc., but our senses are what connects us to the real world out there.

# Idealism

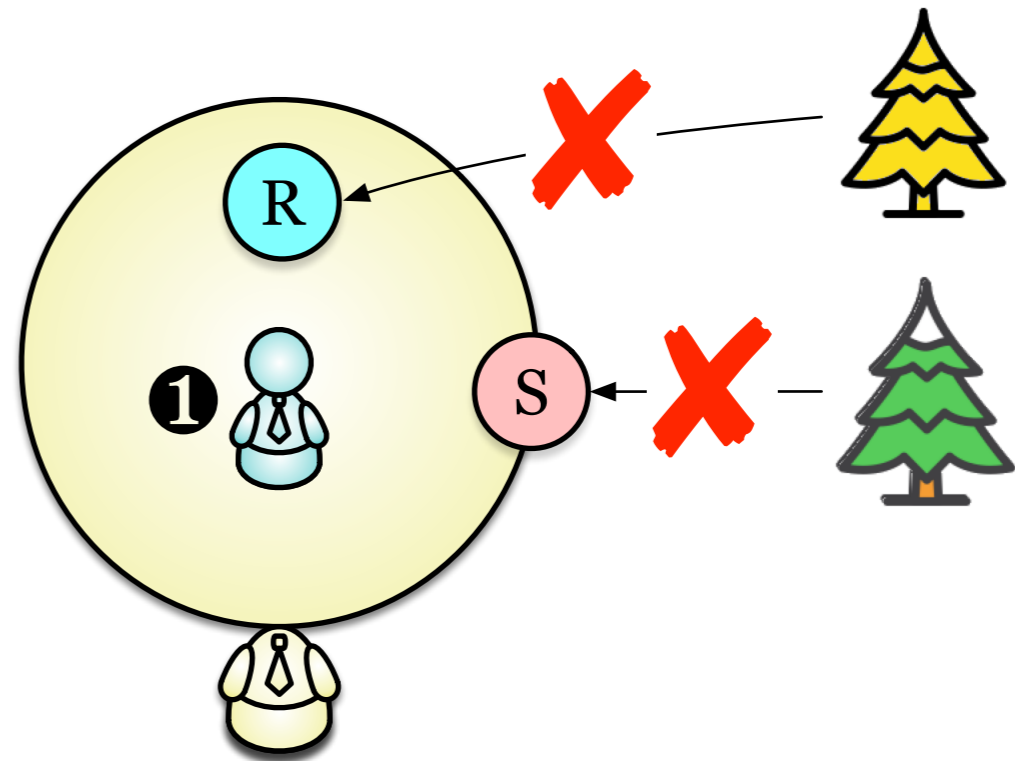
- Idealism claims that there is not one reality out there but two: The realm of ideas or forms (golden tree) and the realm of appearances (green tree).
- Appearances are shadows or imperfect copies of the ideas. ①



- Our senses interact with the objects (the green tree), but that only tells us something about the lesser realm of appearances.
- Reason, however, is able to see (or grasp, intuit, connect with, etc.) the ideas or forms in the realm of ideas. ② Reason is therefore our primary faculty to learn about the part of the world that matters (the unchanging ideas).
- Truth is the correspondence between our belief about the idea of the tree as grasped by reason and the idea of the tree. ③ Proper reasoning ensures that correspondence.

# Skepticism

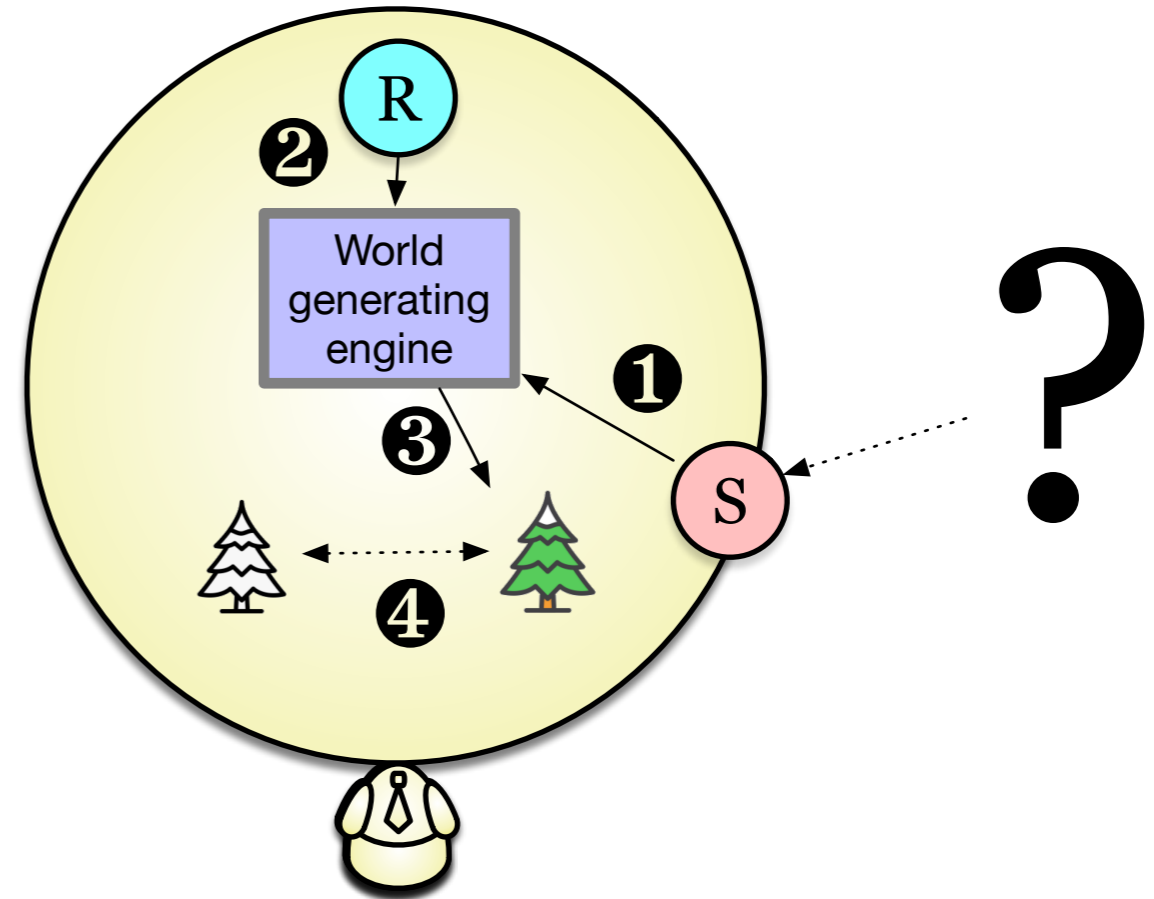
- Skeptics take a dim view of our powers of reason and sense experience.
- Our senses could deceive us (e.g., dreams, illusions, mistakes).
- As to reason, there is no evidence for reason actually connecting us with a world of ideas (i.e., pure speculation).



- If our senses are untrustworthy and our powers of reason are speculative, then our (two) doors to the outside world are closed. We're alone, locked up inside our heads.
- And yet, as we doubt the powers of sense experience and reason, we know for sure that we're engaged in the act of doubting. That implies that we exist: No existence, no doubting.
- We thus have one foundational certainty, namely that we exist as thinking beings. ① That certainty about our own existence takes the place of "truth."
- We cannot, however, make true (or false) claims about the outside world, because we don't have reliable access to it. Thus, certainty is related to but is not the same as truth.

# Transcendental Idealism

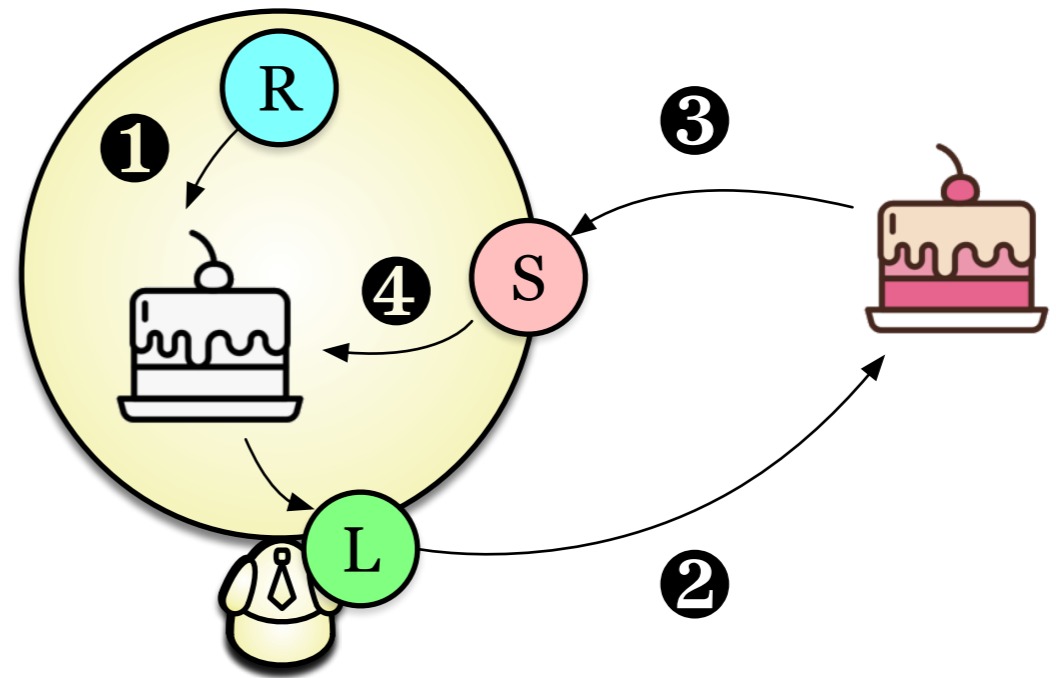
- Tr. idealists share the skeptic's starting point that our senses can't be trusted to report accurately about the world out there and that reason doesn't have access to a realm of ideas. ("?")
- That said, it is hard to deny that our senses report *something* to us and that something appears to be triggered in some way by an outside world.
- Tr. idealists claim that the world out there excites our senses, which report raw sense data to a "world generation engine," which is a feature of the human mind. ①



- The engine takes the raw sense data and renders it intelligible by placing the data in a virtual 3D space and a timeline plus various other categories (causation, etc.) supplied by reason. ② The output of the engine are phenomena. ③ That entire process happens subconsciously.
- Once phenomena have unconsciously been constructed, we experience them as reality and our mind can explore them. Our mind can form beliefs (outlined tree) about phenomena (green tree), and if those beliefs correspond to the phenomena, then they are true. ④
- In tr. idealism, truth is mind-internal and, thus, subjective. However, if all humans operate the same "world generating engine," then we can sync up our beliefs about phenomena and thus make truth inter-subjective.

# Absolute Idealism → Hegel

- At last, we made it to Hegel!
- Most theories of knowledge and reality focus on how information travels from the outside world into our minds.
- Absolute idealism reverses that flow. It is focused on how we make information travel from our minds into the world (and then back).



- Abs. idealism claims that the mind comes up with a concept (the mind-internal recipe for a cake). ① We then realize that concept via our effort and labor (L) in the real world. ② Our senses are involved in the process of baking the cake ③, and we compare the fruits of our labor with our concept. ④
- The first cake may not be very good, so we keep iterating, and in the process, we refine both the actual cake and our concept (we tweak the recipe).
- Once we arrive at a cake that fully realizes our (tweaked) concept, we have created the **Idea** of a cake. That Idea is external to us; it exists in the real world. It is accessible to our senses, which we used to create it.
- The Idea also embodies our mind-internal concept (**Idea = concept + realization**) and is thus fully intelligible to us via reason. The Idea thus contains and is “its own truth,” namely, the perfect realization of a concept.

# Idea = Concept + Realization (2)

- With his theory of the Idea, Hegel seeks to overcome and reconcile what he views as unacceptable positions taken by earlier philosophies:
  - **Hegel is an anti-Dualist.** He does not want to divide the world into a realm of ideas and a realm of appearances.
  - **Hegel is an anti-Skeptic.** Excessive mistrust in our faculties of reason and sense experience is unwarranted and unproductive. Outsized fear from error is a serious mistake in itself.
  - **Hegel is an anti-Kantian** in some but not all respects. He refuses to accept that we have no access to the “world as it is.” That, in his view, is an even more excessive dualism than that of traditional idealism.
- Rather, to the extent that we make the world around us, the world is—in principle—fully intelligible to us.
- Questions:
  - Does that mean that only artifacts (= things we made) are intelligible? What about nature untouched by humanity? Is there such a thing?
  - Is there an argument that archeology is based on a Hegelian premise?

# Mind (1)

- To understand the world, we need to understand how the mind works, because we use the mind to understand the world.
  - That is all the more urgent, since the mind creates the concepts realized as Ideas.
- But there is a problem: I cannot understand my mind through introspection alone, because I am not fully transparent to myself. I am not only what I say “I” to, but I am also what you say “you” to. I need your help to understand and fully become myself and vice versa.

“Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.” PhM, 110. “Each [consciousness] is for the other the medium through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself.” PhM, 112.

- This process of rising to full self-awareness only works if I treat you as an equal. Two consciousnesses “recognize themselves as mutually recognizing another.” PhM, 112
  - E.g., only equals can be trusted to tell each other the truth about blind spots and unconscious biases; only equals make us experience friendship; and to succeed in any endeavor, we all need help from those who are our equals.
- Questions:
  - What makes someone an equal? Equal in what respects?

# Minds (2)

- The requirement of mutual recognition is another highly original aspect of Hegel's philosophy. Equality, respect and dignity are preconditions for knowledge. **Ethics is the foundation of epistemology.**
- Recognition begins with but is not limited to one-on-one interactions. Recognition is scaleable. The more people recognize each other, the greater our collective power to understand ourselves and, thus, the world:  

"What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what mind [spirit] is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: "I" that is "we" and "we" that is "I." PhM, 110
- Question:
  - Does this mean that I have to be a good person to be a smart person? Isn't the evil scientist a practical refutation of Hegel's theory of mind?
  - How should we imagine a mind that consists of or emerges from hundreds of people recognizing each other? Some kind of hive mind? A city? A nation? An AI?

# Minds + Idea = ?

- What happens if we combine Hegel's theory of the mind ("I" = "we") with his theory of the Idea ( $I = c + r$ )?
- We know that the mind is on a path towards ever greater understanding and freedom with more and more minds joining the effort.
- We also know that the concept of freedom requires realization to become an Idea. For Hegel, the Idea of freedom is the state:

*"The state is the reality of concrete freedom.", PoR, 282. "The state is the actuality of the ethical idea []. The state is [] the rational in and for itself.", PoR, 275.*
- Questions:
  - How would a state have to be organized to realize, support and embody radical reciprocal recognition and freedom?
  - Are the implications of Hegel's theory of the state as the reality of freedom reactionary or progressive?

# Dialectic (1)

- The dialectic method is the engine of Hegel's philosophy. It propels the thought process of the mind forward.
  - Because the mind realizes its concepts, it also propels events in the real world forward.
- The dialectic purports to provide us with a method to get from Idea 1 (thesis) to Idea 2 (antithesis) to Idea 3 (synthesis), where Idea 3 is an improvement over Ideas 1 and 2.
- The critical operation, per Hegel, is to push an idea too far. How an idea fails is instructive and will point us to the next idea. We will then push that new idea too far, etc. The dialectic movement swings from one extreme to another, and then "fails forward" toward a new and better, higher-level understanding.
- Example:
  - Thesis: "personal freedom," pushed too far: "total irresponsibility."
  - Antithesis: "community," pushed too far: "total control."
  - Synthesis: "Democratic state under the rule of law," pushed too far ... (etc.)
- Questions:
  - Does this make sense? How do we get from the failure of Idea 1 to Idea 2?
  - Isn't pushing every new idea to the point of failure unbelievably inefficient?

# Dialectic (2)

- The master-servant dialectic in Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind has become (in-)famous. It starts with two isolated minds (A and B):
  - A sees B and thinks: "This thing is no mere animal. It may be free like me! I want it to recognize me as a free individual!" To demonstrate his own freedom, A challenges B to a fight to the death, because no mere animal would do that.
  - If A kills B or B kills A, then the recognition fails. If A and B stop the fight and acknowledge each other as free and equal, then the recognition succeeds (see the Mind slides above). If A overcomes B and makes him his servant, then the following ensues:
    - B works for A, plows A's fields, builds furniture for A's use, etc. This is good for A, because he gets to enjoy the fruits of B's (alienated) labor.
    - But it also creates a problem for A, because he cannot get the recognition from B that he craves. Only an equal can give him that. "The outcome is a recognition that is one-sided and unequal." PhM, 116
    - As time goes on, A becomes ever more dependent on B, while B realizes himself in the world through his labor. Eventually, "[t]hrough work, [B] comes conscious of what he truly is." PhM, 118. The power dynamics flip. At this point, A and B either recognize each other, or B kills A or B subjugates A.
- Questions: Why battle to the death? Could the A/B interaction unfold differently?

# The end state

- Hegel's philosophy describes a process that moves inexorably towards an end state. Unlike a theory of biological evolution, Hegel's system is teleological.
- When the process reaches that goal, it terminates.
  - “World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom—a progress whose necessity we have to recognize.” PoH, 122
  - “[T]he goal is as necessarily fixed for knowledge as the serial progression; it is the point where knowledge no longer needs to go beyond itself, where knowledge finds itself.” PhM, 51
- Once every human recognizes everyone else as equal and every human attains perfect freedom, once all of the social institutions created by humanity reflect such perfect freedom, then we have attained **Absolute Freedom** and **Absolute Knowledge**.
  - “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.”, PoR, 13.
- We have arrived at the end of history.
- Questions:
  - What happens after the end of history?
  - Is the dialectic method sufficiently determinative to make the progress of the consciousness of freedom a “*necessity* we have to recognize?”