

# HEGEL AND PLOTINUS: SPIRIT AS A SELF-CONSCIOUS *NOUS*

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## INTRODUCTION

This project aims to show that the functions played by Plotinus' *Nous* and Hegel's Spirit fundamentally parallel one another insofar as they seek to "understand" their reality's respective first principles. In so doing, they play a "creative" role, i.e., become the fundamental driving force behind the creation and operations of the material world.

If this poster piques your interest, I have decided to make the full project write up available via this [link](#).

The project was undertaken by Luka Subin and supervised by Dr. Clifford Roberts. I was nominated by the Philosophy department.

## REFERENCES

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## FIRST PRINCIPLE

A first principle is an entity which is first **ontologically** compared to all other entities, *not* temporally. It is the first substance to which everything else in reality owes its existence. It exists in its own right and through its own power, requiring nothing else to explain or cause its existence. Everything else in reality, however, directly or indirectly relies on the first principle for its existence.

## THE ABSOLUTE

This is Hegel's first principle. The Absolute is "ultimately real" because It is the only thing that exists in Its own right and in virtue of Its own power, not relying on anything else for its existence. It is a living, developing organism that is a much larger, more perfect form of human nature and activity. Synonyms for the Absolute include God/the divine and reality, because (like the Christian God) It is the source of all being and (like reality) encompasses our entire world.

## SPIRIT & ABSOLUTE

If the Absolute is Hegel's first principle, **Spirit** is akin to the Absolute's mind. It is the collective self-awareness we all share of the Absolute's rational structure. Spirit, despite being essentially immaterial, interacts with and applies meaning to the material world through human beings. All human activity, political, cultural, and intellectual, is Spirit working through us to render the Absolute more aware of Itself and Its inherent structure, thereby bringing about the **Absolute Idea**. The Absolute Idea is the fully actualized, finalized form of the Absolute. Hegel believes that, just like human children, the Absolute begins in a lesser, inchoate mental and physical state and progresses toward a more advanced, fully-fledged one. The **Idea** is Its inherent telos or governing principle. Spirit, in exploring and augmenting the Absolute's self-awareness, actualizes the Idea by making the Absolute more aware of Itself and Its inherent structure.

## HYPOSTASTES: PLOTINUS' COSMOS

Plotinus conceives of the world as being comprised of three intelligible (i.e., non-material) levels of reality in addition to the physical world. We start with the **One**, his **first principle**, and end with the material world characterized by complete plurality. Each level of reality relies on the previous level for its existence, except for the One, which is completely self-explained and self-causing. Plotinus' cosmos is one of descending levels of "perfection," i.e., of "unity" into plurality. From the One comes **Nous**, from **Nous the World-Soul** and finally from the World-Soul the material world.

## NOUS

*Nous* is the second most unified being in reality after the One. It is in *Nous* that the Platonic Forms reside. *Nous* is a product of the One's activity. *Nous* is not itself the One, nor does the One rely on *Nous* in anyway. *Nous* receives a complete picture of the One and can grasp it in its whole, but cannot grasp it accurately since its thought and being are not as complete/unified as the One. A logical distinction between subject (a thinker) and object (the thing thought) arises, thereby preventing it from being perfectly unified (Emilsson 2017, 141).

## SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SPIRIT & NOUS

Both **a)** play a **creative role** in their respective cosmos (i.e., **they allow for and give rise to a dynamic world of material things**) and **b)** draw their creative power from **thinking** (i.e., trying to **rationally grasp**) their respective first principles.

**a)** For Hegel, Spirit's essence consists in the *telos* which governs reality. As Hegel puts it, history is "the exhibition of Spirit, the working out of the explicit knowledge of what [I]t is." Similarly, Plotinus' *Nous* is an immaterial entity which contains within it the Forms, i.e., the principles that underlie the material world. The material world is therefore "an expressed principle of Intellect" in the same way that words are an expressed principle of one's thoughts/thinking. In both these thinkers cosmos, then, the material world consists of an expression of the internal activity of either Spirit or *Nous*.

**b)** *Nous*, in grasping the One, becomes a receptacle for the Forms, allowing lower levels of reality and, ultimately, the material world to make use of them to generate the world. Similarly, Spirit thinks and reflects upon the Absolute's nature and essence through human conscious, intellectual activity. It is through human intellectual pursuits that Spirit can realize the Absolute Idea.

## ONE DIFFERENCE: SPIRIT AS SELF-CONSCIOUS NOUS

For Hegel, Plotinus' vision of reality is incomplete. Spirit, in actualizing and attaining the Absolute Idea, the *telos* of reality, expands upon and ultimately completes Plotinus' system by reconciling the rest of reality with the first principle. Spirit, in contrast to *Nous*, is a fundamental feature of the Absolute, as It is that part of the Absolute which is self-conscious. Although the Absolute does not need Spirit for Its existence, It needs Spirit to fully actualize Its own nature. Hegel proclaims that the Absolute Idea is the end result of Spirit's activity. As Spirit works toward the realization of the Absolute Idea, the Absolute gains subjectivity. Part of the work of religion, art, and, ultimately, philosophy is to remove all barriers impeding the Absolute's fully actualizing Itself by augmenting Its self-consciousness of Its own nature. Spirit is thus a kind of "self-conscious" *Nous* capable of a deeper, more profound kind of thought which is useful to Its first principle.

## CONCLUSION

Spirit helps to develop and complete the Absolute's nature. *Nous* is the underlying principle behind the generation of the material world. Both therefore play an integral role in the functioning and creation of the lower levels of reality. As immaterial, mental entities, their power comes from their ability to think the first principle of reality. The differences between these entities lies more in a difference of disposition between Hegel and Plotinus as thinkers than in their intended function. Hegel firmly believes reality is not a sterile construct where each level can be entirely separated and organized hierarchically. Spirit thus takes on a more important role in his cosmological system. In thinking Its first principle and developing/bringing about Its subjectivity, Its self-consciousness, Spirit reconciles Itself with the Absolute. At least in principle, then, we can be united with the Absolute and reach a complete understanding of reality through an act of understanding brought about by our role in Spirit's self-conscious *Nous*-like activity.