In our last lecture we looked at some of the philosophical backgrounds of the modern period and now I want to turn, in this lecture and the next few, to talk about a key figure for both modern theology and modern philosophy, namely the philosopher Hegel. Before we do that, though, let’s bow for a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you for the privilege of study. We pray that as we begin to look at the thought of Hegel you would help us to understand it; you would help us to see what he is saying and see ultimately how it has affected much of modern theology and philosophy. We pray for your blessing then upon each thing which is said and done in Christ’s name, Amen.

Hegel lived from 1770 through 1831, and you might think by looking at those dates that this is a long way back to go for someone who supposedly is involved in contemporary theology, and if we solely looked at the dates of Hegel’s life, I think we’d have to agree, but the fact of the matter is much of modern philosophy and theology is a reaction in one way or another to the thought of Hegel. He’s just too important a figure for us not to take a look at him. What I would like to do in my lectures on Hegel is to fundamentally deal with three broad areas.

I want to begin by talking about some of the key terms that are used in Hegel’s thinking and define what they mean. Then I want to turn to a discussion of Hegel’s Dialectical Method and I’d like to explain that very carefully because there is a certain way in which that is presented in much contemporary thinking which really does not do justice to what Hegel meant. Then after we have not only explained the Hegelian Method but illustrated it from some of his writings, I want to turn to look at some of the key concepts or ideas in Hegel’s philosophy; concepts, of course, that are going to be extremely important for theology.

Well, with that in mind, let’s turn first of all to look at some of
the key terms that Hegel uses. Hegel actually had somewhat of a limited vocabulary that he used in his most significant work, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (or *The Phenomenology of Spirit.*) That’s a very involved and a very long book, and when you look at the vocabulary you don’t find that there’s a gigantic amount of it, but what makes it difficult to understand this important work is that Hegel has some very specific meanings for the terms that he uses, and what also makes it difficult is that sometimes you find him changing the meaning of these terms from one part of the book to another. So I think it might be helpful for us to look at some of the key terms that Hegel uses and just see what he means.

An initial one that I’d like to define is the term *absolute*. Now when Hegel uses the term *absolute*, he means by it *unconditioned* and he means that something which is absolute is not conditioned by any object outside of it. In other words, it’s all comprehensive. To say that someone’s knowledge is absolute means that there isn’t anything outside of what that person knows that could be known; his knowledge is all comprehensive. And it’s really good that I related this to knowledge because, as a matter of fact, Hegel does talk about the absolute largely in relation to knowledge. He talks about absolute knowledge in particular.

According to Hegel, absolute knowledge is one of many shapes of consciousness. Now in Hegel’s thinking, a shape of consciousness is a set of ideas about the sort of thing that the knower is, the sort of thing that the object of knowledge is, and the sort of thing that the relation between the two is. So a shape of consciousness then is an idea about the knower, the object of knowledge, and the relation between the two.

According to Hegel, absolute knowledge is one of the shapes of consciousness and, as a matter of fact, it’s the absolute or the ultimate one. Absolute knowledge then is the final shape of consciousness. There is nothing outside of it to condition or to determine it. A shape of consciousness then, the ultimate one, is the way the structure of absolute knowledge appears to consciousness. The content of absolute knowledge, according to Hegel, is all the chapters of his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. As you come to the very last chapter of this book, you find that the title is absolute knowledge.

Hegel says at one point in his book that, and I quote him, “Everything depends on seeing the absolute as subject and not substance only.” Now what does he mean there? What he means
is that the absolute is not just a thing. For example, absolute knowledge is not just a thing that is there in the world, but it is also a subject which means that it has an ability to act and to move so to speak. It means in essence to call it a subject and not only a substance, it means that the absolute is a process, if you will; it is the process of the manifestation of the absolute. It’s not some static thing that just sits there; instead it is something that continues to unfold itself.

According to Hegel, the absolute is just the self-reflexive manifestation or revelation of itself. If this language sounds a bit strange and fuzzy, we have to get used to it. That’s the way Hegel talks and that’s what makes it difficult to understand him. So he says that the absolute is just the self-reflexive manifestation or revelation of itself. It is the process whereby the absolute is manifested and in one sense you don’t really have the absolute until it’s fully manifested.

Now when you think about this, this is sort of a strange view of the nature of reality because what Hegel is saying about the absolute is that it really isn’t something until it’s fully manifested, but on the other hand it’s always a something which is working itself out in the process of manifesting itself fully. So that is surely a strange kind of idea that it’s both a something and it’s not a something. There’s a sense in which it is a something and a sense in which it’s not.

When Hegel talks about absolute knowledge and the absolute he also has a habit of using this term to refer to the all-comprehensiveness of his own philosophy. Hegel set out to structure a philosophy which incorporated everything and dealt with everything and as a result he thought that his own philosophy was the absolute philosophy as opposed to any other philosophies that were just relative in nature. They didn’t cover everything but he attempted to do so.

Emil Fackenheim in his book *The Religious Dimension of Hegel’s Thought* explains something of what Hegel thought about the comprehensiveness of his philosophy. Fackenheim says, “But one does not begin to grasp the Hegelian claim to comprehensiveness if one sees it as extending to other philosophies only. Such indeed is the limit of pre-Kantian metaphysics. That metaphysic seeks to grasp either a highest reality or else a universal structure of all reality thus leaving for lesser type of knowledge respectively lower realities and contingent particulars. Moreover, being theoretical
knowledge only it remains simply distinct from what is not knowledge; for example, practical life with its varied concerns.”

“The Hegelian philosophy in contrast seeks to grasp a reality which lives in the particulars by means of a thought which passes through and encompasses them. Moreover, it is not a theory beside practical life but rather an activity which moves through both theory and practice being in a sense neither and in a sense both.” Later on Fackenheim gives this further word of explanation. He says, “For Hegel, the difference between philosophy (and then parenthetically Fackenheim says it is doubtful whether the term “metaphysics” should still be used) and the whole remainder of life,” that is, “the difference between philosophy and the whole remainder of life (both theoretical and practical) is one of standpoint. All other human activities are truly in contact with reality, but reach partial truths only because they are limited to finite standpoints. Philosophy or at any rate the true or final philosophy rises to an infinite or absolute standpoint and to encompass and transfigure the partial truth of the finite standpoints into a truth no longer partial is its sole aim” And that perspective on philosophy was not only what Hegel thought was the ideal of philosophy but he considered his own philosophy to do just that, to encompass all of reality. Well, that’s something of what Hegel means by the term absolute.

Let me turn now to another term in Hegel’s vocabulary - the term universal. When Hegel uses this term, he uses it in the sense of the general as opposed to the particular. Concepts, entities, or even terms can be universal rather than particular. Now you might be inclined to think that this term universal is equivalent or identical to Hegel’s notion of the absolute but it’s not. There’s a difference in it. Examples of some things that are universal for Hegel would be time as opposed to any given moment within time. A specific moment in time would be a particular but time in general would be a universal. Another example of something that Hegel would consider universal is space as a totality as opposed to any given point or place in space.

Well, let me move on to another term in Hegel’s vocabulary and his thinking, namely the concepts and the terms abstract and concrete. When Hegel uses the term abstract, he means by it the focusing on one aspect of something in giving the explanation for the whole thing. In other words, to abstract is to separate one thing from all the rest. To be abstract is to be one part of the whole. This then means that the abstract is really equivalent
to the particular as opposed to the universal. That’s what Hegel means by *abstract*. Now consider what he means by *concrete*. That which is concrete is inclusive of more than one item. In fact, the more inclusive a thing is the more concrete it is. Thus we can see that the universal would be the most concrete of all. The particular would be the most abstract. Now of course Hegel would also say that the absolute winds up being the most concrete of anything because it’s all inclusive of everything: absolute and concrete then.

Let me turn to some other terms now in Hegel’s thinking, the terms *immediate*, *mediate*, and *mediation*. Now probably when you hear those terms, at least the first one, you think of temporal notions, but when you come to Hegel you have to remove temporal notions from these terms altogether. When Hegel says that something is immediate he means that it is devoid of any relations whatsoever, something that is *immediate* then is just there without any relations to any other subject or object. One of the things that becomes extremely important in Hegel’s philosophy is his belief that there is nothing that exists that is in fact immediate. Everything that exists exists as related to a whole number of things.

What about the terms *mediate* and *mediation*? Well there are several senses in which these terms get used. First of all *mediate*. This is used in Hegel as an adjective and in this sense it means related to an other or many other objects or subjects, so the something that is mediate is something that’s related. Something that is mediate then is involved in a one-to-many relation. *Mediation* then would be the fact of this relation.

Well there’s another sense in which *mediate* is used in Hegel and in this case it’s used as a verb; to mediate is to constitute something through a process of inter-relations. Thus, two entities whether they are objects or subjects or whatever they may be, those two entities become what they are by their inter-relation with one another. The process of constituting what these objects or subjects are by inter-relating them is called *mediation*.

Well there’s another sense in which we can talk about mediation and it is the most complex notion of mediation in Hegel. For Hegel, the most complex notion of mediation involves self-reflection. In a case of self-reflection you have initially the self relating to other selves on the one hand, but you also have the self relating to itself. Here you have to think of the idea of someone so-to-speak getting
outside of himself to take a look at himself objectively. There is a kind of mediation that is the most involved in Hegel’s thought; not only that you relate to others, but you also relate to yourself.

Now in all these ideas of mediation, the concept or the notion of negation is also present. By that I mean that whatever a thing is or becomes is to find not only in terms of its relationships to other things as to what relations there are, but also what relations are not there so that we, in defining a concept, not only talk about what it is, but what it is not.

Let me turn now to another term in Hegel’s thought, and these two terms actually are very important for Hegel especially because he says that they apply to his Hegelian Dialectical Method. I’m thinking of the terms necessity or necessary. Now we use those terms in various ways in English, but we need to be very clear as to what Hegel means by them. When Hegel uses these terms, he doesn’t mean to refer to a need or a want. We talk about the bare necessities of life. That’s not the sense in which he means necessity or necessary. In addition, Hegel does not mean to refer to that which already has happened or must happen and can’t be changed.

We oftentimes say that the past is necessary. There’s nothing you can do about it. You can’t change it. That’s not the sense in which Hegel uses the term necessary. Hegel also does not use necessary in the typical philosophical sense of true for all possible worlds. A lot of philosophers will say that something is necessary, and what they mean by that is that it’s true under every imaginable circumstance or scenario that you could come up with. That isn’t what Hegel means when he uses the term necessary or necessity.

Well then, what does he mean? Necessity or necessary is to be taken as synonymous with natural as opposed to arbitrary. Usually this term is used to refer to things that are in a process. Something then is necessary if it would be the natural alternative or the normal thing that would come next in a process. Something in a process then is said to have necessity if before that thing existed the process demanded that in considering the next step to be actualized the natural move to make is going to be to actualize a particular thing rather than something else. Now Hegel will say that there’s a certain necessity to the various stages of history, and what he means there is that if you look at the circumstances historically at any given time in history, you can see that the most natural thing to come next will be one thing rather than another,
and so out of the stage of history in which you find yourself, the next one just naturally flows. And if you ask if some other stage of history could flow out of it, he would say, “No, the groundwork has not been prepared for that.”

Well, I think you’ll get a feel better when we look at the Hegelian Method and some of the other concepts in Hegel as to exactly how this idea of being the most natural normal stage in a process works.

Let me turn to another term in Hegel, and it is the term of alienation or self-estrangement. Now our modern concept of alienation is that alienation is something that you and I suffer. We wind up being passive in the process and we’re just removed from other things. For Hegel, alienation refers to relinquishing or abandoning what you have in favor of giving it to other people or even to all people. Well, when you think of alienation in that sense you can see that it’s really a positive force and an active thing rather than something which is passive and negative.

The estrangement or the alienation is of the self from the self rather than focusing on yourself and your concerns; you relinquish what is yours in favor of the majority. An example of this sort of alienation would be the relinquishment of certain rights that we might have if we were living in isolation from society. We relinquish those rights to society and what we get in return is protection by an army and by laws that the society has enacted. At one point in the Phenomenology of Spirit Hegel says that culture is self-estrangement. Now that may sound like a very odd idea, but what he means here is that individuals give up themselves, they relinquish themselves in the state of nature in order to enter into a culture. The idea then here is that you gain yourself by relinquishing yourself or abandoning yourself. So you can see that the statement “culture is self-estrangement” is not meant to be a negative comment about culture in any way, shape, or form.

The next term that I want to look at is the term faith, and as is often times the case with Hegel, it’s helpful to see what he doesn’t mean in order to help us understand what he does mean. For example, Hegel does not mean when he uses the term faith the recognition of one’s own powerlessness. He doesn’t mean, as well, the response to the holy other. Likewise, he does not refer to the throwing of oneself on the mercy of an omnipotent God whom one cannot hope to please by any works, and then faith is not viewed in Hegel’s thinking as a merely theoretical affirmation.
which asserts a mere object; in other words, belief that there is a God, but nothing beyond that at all. Likewise, he doesn’t mean by faith a mere feeling that one might have toward God.

Well then, what does he mean by faith? Well, he tells us that the ground of faith is spirit and the recognition of spirit in another. In just a few moments, I’m going to turn to what Hegel means by spirit and we’ll understand this better, but fundamentally what I can say at this point is that faith is the recognition of what is like or similar in another. Faith specifically though, as Hegel defines it, refers to the whole inward/outward life of man and the inward part of man is man’s feeling; the outward part of man’s life is his affirmation, but it’s not that inward/outward life of man in and of itself, but it’s that inward/outward life of man in his relation to the divine infinity.

Now Hegel also tells us that faith cannot be initiated except accidentally by external things like miracles or divine threats or promises or the Holy Scripture. What produces faith then is not something that is external to the divine human relation but is rather something that is within that relationship, namely spirit and the recognition of spirit by spirit.

Well, let me turn now to a definition of spirit because obviously that’s important for faith and it is also important in and of itself. Hegel makes the statement in his Phenomenology of Spirit as follows, he says, “Reason is spirit when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to the level of truth and reason is consciously aware of itself as its own world and of the world as itself.” Now you may say, “What in the world does that mean?” Well let me see if we can’t unpack the notion of spirit as we find it in Hegel. You’ll find that it’s a very complex one.

In general, we can say some things and then more specifically I can explain it. The term spirit or in the German geist refers to some sort of general consciousness, a single mind if you will that is common to all people that extends over all reality, material as well as otherwise, so in this sense spirit is to be seen as a thing. On the other hand, Hegel will also say that spirit is a free internal self-development of that consciousness, so in this sense, spirit is an activity. Well, what does this then mean, in general, as to his understanding of spirit? We can say that his concept of it is that spirit is a kind of general consciousness that is extended over all of reality to gradually develop reality. As a result, Hegel says that reality is spirit. By reality he doesn’t mean the material universe
alone, but he means everything that encompasses existence. Well, that’s the general idea of spirit and Hegel, but we can become more specific about what he means even yet.

Again, we can make some headway by talking about what he does not mean spirit is. Spirit, for example, is not to be thought of as opposed to matter. Now that’s typically the way we think of that which is spirit; it’s contrary to matter, but that’s the totally wrong way to think of spirit as Hegel uses it. Something else that he doesn’t mean by spirit; spirit is not a transcendent something or entity, that is, it’s not a consciousness that is purely transcendent from every specific consciousness. A third thing that he doesn’t mean by spirit is that spirit is not universal consciousness in the sense that we all have the same thoughts, ideas, feelings, and are one universal mind. In this case, each of us would not have our own mind, but our individual minds would be part of a universal mind; one and only one. And that would mean that we didn’t have our own private minds and our own private thoughts. Now that’s not what Hegel means by spirit either.

Another thing that he doesn’t mean is a sense of a universal consciousness in the sense of an abstract entity including the common properties of all individuals. Now what do I mean here? We might think of “the average American housewife.” Well now, what’s she like? Well, we take various concepts of what American housewives are like, we abstract them and we put that together to formulate the idea of the average American housewife. That might be what we’re inclined to think spirit is, but that’s not the idea that Hegel has either.

Now we might be inclined also to say that spirit means that there is some entity, some thing like a soul that underlies all particular mental states and events and that spirit is just the notion that all individuals share the same soul. Hegel also tells us that this is the wrong analysis of spirit. It is not a stable thing, an object that underlies all mental phenomena. Well, you may be wondering what in the world does he think spirit is.

Let me talk about what he does mean by it. Spirit, we saw, can be conceived as a thing, and it can also be conceived as an activity in Hegel. As a thing or a phenomenon or a force of general and universal consciousness, spirit for Hegel is the underlying principle of consciousness and at the same time the underlying rational will behind all practical reason and action. Well, what is this principle that underlies all practical reason and action? It is for Hegel a
doubling of self-consciousness whereby each individual self-consciousness recognizes other self-consciousnesses and also recognizes the unification or the unity of all self-consciousnesses. Spirit then is something that involves recognition of other self-consciousnesses and that recognition is very important for spirit.

Hegel says that the “I exist” of one self-consciousness is possible only through another person’s “I exist.” And it is a condition of my very being that another be for me and that I be for another. Remember what we said about Hegel’s idea as to whether anything exists immediately. He says nothing exists immediately apart from relations to anything else. Here you see this idea coming back again that to exist is to exist in relations with other thing. In other words, we might say it this way: that no man, no woman exists in isolation from everything else.

To exist means that we are conscious that we exist in relation to others, and as a result of that we move from the subject “I” to the subject “we.” We might summarize what he is saying here in the words of the philosopher Jean Hyppolite who writes about this idea as follows: “The universal self-consciousness which Hegel claims to reach is human reality as an inter-subjectivity; a ‘we’ which alone is concrete.” Hyppolite says, “The universal self-consciousness which Hegel claims to reach then is not Kant’s ‘I think’ in general but human reality as an inter-subjectivity, a ‘we’ which alone is concrete. Spirit is this ‘we’ precisely insofar as it simultaneously brings about the unity and the separation of ‘I.’” We recognize that we are individuals, but we are individuals in relation to a collective entity. Well, spirit then is this “we” but not merely as inter-subjectivity. Spirit is this “we” insofar as it simultaneously brings about the unity and the separation of each individual.

Well, that’s spirit as a thing, but we also said that spirit in Hegel is an activity of this thing, this substance of “universal consciousness,” if we can put it that way. Well, what is this activity? It is the capacity or the ability of retaining over its preceding phases. This is to be understood against the idea of isolating out one phase in a process from the whole. Spirit is that force which allows an ongoing process not only to move to the next phase but to move to the next stage without losing any of its previous or prior stages or phases. There is then a union of all things that the process has moved over without obliterating individuality of any of it. It is, if you will, a movement from partition or split to reconciliation. Spirit then proceeds from some split to some association. We
might say, as an example, that the doubling of self-consciousness then is an associating of two self-consciousnesses.

Spirit is then the progressive subordination of determination from the outside by self-consciousness. What does that mean? He means that progressively spirit is an activity which removes particular things in isolation from one another and unifies them in an inter-subjective whole. Now think back to the definition of faith that we saw just a few moments ago as spirit recognizing spirit, this activity of unifying two self-consciousnesses, in this case the individual human being with God.

Well, these are some key terms then in Hegel’s thought. Let me move though from this process of definition to begin to look at another topic in Hegel, namely the Hegelian Method, and this is a very, very important thing to understand in Hegel because so many philosophers and theologians after him adopted and adapted to their own needs and concerns in one way or another.

Now, what I’d like to do at the outset is just make some general comments about the Hegelian Method and then I’d like to move to talk about the method itself and the constituents of it. From previous studies you may have one perception of the Hegelian Method. In fact it was the perception that I quite frequently heard in my undergraduate studies, namely the idea that there is a thesis and then there’s an antithesis and then there’s a synthesis from among the thesis and antithesis, and we’ll talk a little bit more about that common perception of it, but I came to find as I studied further in philosophy is that that common notion of the Hegelian Dialectic Method is not the proper way to understand it. We do want to see what Hegel says and once you see how this works, I think you’ll understand better some of his concepts and also some of the concepts that we’ll find in other contemporary thinkers.

Well, by way of general discussion and description of the method, I want to say, first of all, that this is a method which is non-argumentative but instead it is demonstrative. Now when I say that Hegel’s method is not argumentative, I need to explain what I mean by an argument. In philosophy an argument is the presentation or the marshaling of evidence that leads to a particular conclusion. As you look at Hegel’s work and his method in particular, you find that it really doesn’t present any such
arguments that move from premises to conclusion. Instead, Hegel tries to show the movement of a concept or an idea and he tries to demonstrate the necessity in the movement and development of that concept. Now this attempt to say that the movement from stage x to stage y of a concept is necessary, that attempt to show that is about the only kind of argument that you get in Hegel. By trying to show the necessity of development of a concept, Hegel is trying to demonstrate that what he is espousing must be true because all of us are supposed to see the necessity of each move in his thinking.

Now this non-argumentativeness of Hegel makes it really very hard to grab ahold of his position and attack it. You look for the arguments and you say, “I'd like to be able to present counterarguments,” but you don’t find any arguments. If you’re going to interact with Hegel and reject him, usually you have to present objections to him at one of several points. For one thing, you can question the necessity of each move in the process that he’s laying out before you. If the process is his interpretation of history and he says, “Things must move from stage x to stage y,” you might question as to whether really things have to go just the way he says.

Or you might question and challenge his starting point. With Hegel, if you grant him his starting point oftentimes he's got you because he can show that as he unfolds the concept, things naturally have to move to the stages he’s talking about. So you might just object to his starting point. You might also say that the way he has explained fully a given stage in the process is objectionable. You grant that things need to go to that stage, but you don’t think that he, in fact, has explained a particular stage very well or adequately.

Then you might, on the other hand, complain that you don’t like the way he defines his terms. In other words, what I’m saying here is that to attack any part of the system you almost have to attack the pre-supposition surrounding it that even get it started and that makes it rather difficult to proceed.

Well, Hegel’s method of demonstration rather than argument is accomplished through what is referred to as his Dialectical Method, and I want to look more specifically at that method now.
There are a number of things that I want to talk about in regard to Hegel’s Dialectic Method, but let me begin at this point by just talking about several German words and what they mean. They’re used by Hegel quite frequently, and they’re very important to the understanding of his method. I’m thinking here of the German words *aufheben*, *aufgehoben*, and *aufhebung*. Now the root idea in all of these words is a negative one because they have the notion of cancelling or eliminating, so we can say that that which is cancelled or negated is to be spoken of as *aufgehoben*. The cancellation, the negation, or the elimination of something is *aufheben*. Now for Hegel, though, these terms mean more than just simple cancellation or elimination. It is not merely the cancelling or the negating of things that are contradictory but rather also the sublimation and preservation of that which is cancelled or negated. Now as we proceed with our understanding of Hegel’s Dialectic Method and his philosophy in general, we’ll understand why it is that he thinks the things that are cancelled or negated also need to be preserved and sublimated in a higher-order reality, but more of that next time.

Next time we’ll turn directly to the constituents of the Dialectic Method and we’ll explain how it works, and then I’ll give you an example from Hegel’s own writings as to how this thing works.