The absolute Idea has shown itself to be the identity of the theoretical and the practical Idea....The Notion is not merely soul, but free subjective Notion that is for itself and therefore possesses personality... but which, nonetheless, is not exclusive individuality, but explicitly universality.... All else is error, confusion, opinion, endeavour, caprice and transitoriness; the absolute Idea alone is being, imperishable life, self-knowing truth, and is all truth.

Hegel, Logic

In 1806, G.W.F. Hegel completed his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This work, which Hegel created as an introduction to his philosophic system, reestablished the dialectical method in western thought. Dialectics originated with the ancient Greeks, and was directed to the achievement of knowledge as an integrated system, it was easier, however, for the ancients to give credence to such a system than for Hegel and his contemporaries, since in the intervening ages philosophy had split into the various natural and human sciences. Moreover, knowledge itself seemed irreparably divided by the Cartesian dualism of subject and object, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Hegel, however, could not accept the fragmentation of knowledge, and of experience itself, as the final word. Although he did not use the term "interdisciplinary," Hegel used the dialectical method to create an interdisciplinary system. He sought unity--not by ignoring differences, as his friend Schelling increasingly did, but by the mediation of differences.¹ In this way Hegel hoped to preserve the wealth of specific, organized information developed by the particular sciences, yet not be bound by their implicit assumptions and presumed boundaries. The *Phenomenology* attempts to demonstrate the possibility of an integrated system by deriving the principles necessary to its construction. As such, it stands as a classic of interdisciplinary thought.
In the final chapter, "Absolute Knowledge," Hegel outlines the philosophic foundations of integrative science. Absolute knowledge is knowledge conceived as an organic process in which the essential components are not academic disciplines or atomistic elements, but world-views identified by phenomenology of world history. Though divisions of knowledge do appear in the final chapter, they do so in order to be cancelled as forms of false consciousness, preserved in their substantial contributions, and sublimated to increasingly comprehensive expressions of wholeness. Thus we can interpret absolute knowledge as a philosophic meditation on the articulated unity of the particular sciences. Even the final apparent divisions of knowledge into history, phenomenology, and absolute knowledge, which Hegel himself introduces, are no sundering of unity, but moments in the process of its development. They are to be understood not as areas or "parts," but as stages. History provides the raw material, the basic data; phenomenology provides the discipline of observation that allows the data to be uncovered and interpreted; absolute knowledge is the systematized and unified result. This knowledge is not even limited to integration at the level of theory; it subsumes modes of historical action as well. Put another way, the dialectic develops on three planes: that of *theoria*. that of praxis, and that of the absolute, which represents the union of the two. When Hegel declares that "the truth is the whole," he is calling for the most radical form of integrated thinking since Plato.

To achieve this ambitious project, Hegel had to redefine the basic tools of thought: concepts, experience, even logic itself. As early as the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel warns that true knowledge cannot be expressed in the form of ideas or formulas abstracted from experience. Truth results from the fusion of ideas with the experiences they reflect and comprehend:

a so-called fundamental proposition or first principle of philosophy, even if it is true, is yet nonetheless false just because and insofar as it is merely a fundamental proposition, merely a first principle.

He applies the same judgement to all abstractions. Hegel asks that isolated ideas be transformed into Concepts (*Begriffe*) or Ideas by combining the particular abstraction with its logical and historical context. Thus through the course of the *Phenomenology* Hegel works toward increasingly comprehensive concepts: spirit, reason, temporality, science. Their content and relations appear mystical from the point of view of common sense, which clings to abstract ideas and sporadic observations, and therefore dooms itself to vagueness and misplaced concreteness. But the new concepts prove to be concrete and determinate when seen in relation to their historical origins and to the system as a whole.

The validity of Hegel's concepts cannot depend on mere textbook history, however, which Hegel sees as a chaotic mixture of truth and circumstance. Instead, it depends on the phenomenology of the ways human
existence appears and organizes itself in and through history. The whole Phenomenology, then, is an historical demonstration of Hegel's final assertions about spirit, self-consciousness, time and the absolute. Those conclusions are at one and the same time a recollection of the sciences and world-concepts of the past, and a formulation of the articulated unity of those sciences. In absolute knowledge, art, religion, philosophy, and politics are conjoined. The vagueness that enters the work in this final moment is generated by the difficulty of preserving an encyclopedic multiplicity within a substantive unity. Modern generalists and interdisciplinarians can easily sympathize with this problem.

In addition to redefining concepts and their relation to history, Hegel reconstructs logic itself. Some aspects of this effort are well known. Hegel realized that philosophy had inherited a static conception of truth, enthroned in a formalistic logic. Static categories made it impossible to understand change, or any changing phenomenon: organic growth, political revolution, psychological development. Hegel responded to this situation by creating a new logic based on contradiction rather than identity. In dialectical logic, contradictions combine and interact, forming new concepts at a higher level of complexity. These in turn give rise to new contradictions and new fusions. Thought is thus infused with motion. Truth itself develops and evolves toward wholeness; concepts become flexible and multi-dimensional, without losing their character as indicators of essential qualities. Essences now participate in existence, and being in becoming. The comprehensive concept finds its proper context in logical structures progressing toward comprehensiveness.

The new logic has a tremendous range of applications. We find Hegel applying it to experiential problems, historical ages, even individual cultural artifacts. Who would expect the relationship between master and slave to have an internal logic, a metaphysics, an organic structure expressible in terms of principle and contradiction, consciousness and self-consciousness? Who would expect dramatic works such as Hamlet and Orestes, or architectural achievements like the Parthenon, to find their way into a discussion of religion as necessary aspects of its definition and development? This kind of radical conjunction is based on Hegel's discovery that experiences reveal an inner "logic" if approached in the right way. Even the mundane and the irrational often prove to have a hidden rationality. World-views have structures that can be thought, and through thought connected to one another. The same is true of human activity. Action presupposes a world-view, a world-design, in which human activity has meaning and context. Action, then, no matter how concrete and mundane, is also a type of experience that can be grasped in thought and logically systematized.

Hegel's assertion is not, however, that abstract logical forms rule experience, or that all experiences have equal metaphysical significance. Not all experiences receive the same kind of attention in The Phenomenology of Spirit, and many don't appear at all. Hegel has concentrated on those phenomena which arise in an historical overview, and show themselves to be necessary in
articulating and solving the fundamental problems of human existence. What's more, the logic he introduces is derived from an existential rather than an essentialist standpoint. The world-structures he discovers are not eternal laws writ in the fabric of things (for this would return us to an inert formalism), but possibilities consciousness discovers within itself as "being in the world." In fact, for Hegel the possibility of knowledge, and of systematic knowledge, depends on creating a logic derived from subjective experiences as well as from "objective" discoveries. Reality must be subject as well as substance if the breaches in knowledge are to be healed.\textsuperscript{8}

Thus another fundamental redefinition is necessary for the construction of a comprehensive, interdisciplinary science: a redefinition of the subject. Hegel finds that he and his generation have a unique opportunity. The maturation of history, as a discipline and a form of knowledge, can expand all of the subject's powers of mental assimilation and integration. Hegel sees a way out of the subject/object dualism plaguing the sciences, and the "abstract thought versus concrete experience" dualism plaguing every reflective person. The solution involves the historical discovery that the intellectual boundaries consciousness must transcend are boundaries which it has posited in the first place. What consciousness has done it can undo. It is by recognizing the subject as actively engaged in constructing and mastering his world that Hegel overcomes the subject/object disruption of the world, and establishes the possibility of integrative knowledge.

The importance of the subject modifies Hegel's approach in other ways as well. Too often commentators defuse the active, integrative force of Hegel's method by substituting the bare term "synthesis" for the actual labor of synthesis. Hegel calls for the unification of all cultural realms, but finds that this can only take place through the active, laboring individual. Thus there is nothing automatic or "given" about synthesis. For an abstract thinker, strict definitions are the essence of thought; concepts must be purged of empirical and personal aspects, they must become totally generic. Within this framework, even synthesis must remain an abstract formal activity. Hegel, on the other hand, allows the empirical shapes and personal forms which concepts assume within particular situations to qualify the concepts themselves. Thus synthesis can be observed taking place when individuals make existential choices, and when world-historical individuals redirect whole traditions.\textsuperscript{9} Hegel's idea of opposition and synthesis has affinities, then, with the modern sociologist's or anthropologist's conception of "society" or "culture" as a webwork of structural/functional relationships changing through time. Despite the usual bows to scientific empiricism, a careful sociologist realizes that abstractions like "family," "class," and "individual" can become part of a dynamic invocation of the actual shape of life, if we abandon strict definitions and work out the situational meanings of the terms. But this means placing new emphasis on the individual, in all his concreteness and particularity, as an actor and as a knower. When we do, we can see synthesis taking place, and need only translate the phenomenon into appropriate theoretical terms.
This comparison with social science underscores an important point. For Hegel, the process of cumulative synthesis which yields unitary science must prove itself in two important ways. It must be based on radical empiricism, and it must subject itself to the test of a thoroughgoing scepticism. By treating subjectivity as simply another phenomenon to be studied, Hegel becomes more empirical than the empiricists, who tended, then as now, to ignore the impact of their own status as subjects on the objects they study. Kant had already established the need for a critique of scientific reason, and Hegel sees himself as extending and completing that critique. Kant hoped his critique would finally give the various sciences a firm philosophic foundation, and here too Hegel is simply continuing Kant's efforts. In addition, Hegel hopes to overcome scepticism by incorporating it. Every position he encounters or develops, he subjects to a thoroughgoing critique. This moment of negation is so important to Hegel that it becomes part of his logic, and part of his definition of subjectivity's powers. Radical empiricism conjoined with radical scepticism is what Hegel means by the phenomenological method. The result is a mode of thought which progressively comprehends the immediate (in the sense of empirical phenomena), the multiple forms of cultural mediation and synthesis, and the final syntheses achieved by the concrete human subject. The process can be thought of as an expansion of subjectivity, or consciousness, to include many world views, first individually, one "world" at a time, then as a group, and finally as contributors to an architectonic system.

The validity of Hegel's system rests, then, on two inter-related proofs: that subjectivity can be an object of study, and that subjectivity is capable of radical extension and transformation. Put another way, the dialectic depends on proving that subjectivity itself is dialectical in nature. The Phenomenology attempts this demonstration by describing the modes of subjectivity that have appeared over the recoverable span of human history. Hegel concludes that thought itself--the power of reflection--has driven subjectivity into a painful process of growth and evolution. Thought is the inherent daemonic principle that plagues and prods the individual into creating, negating, and re-creating cultural forms. As one commentator put it:

Reflection is the principle of absolute dialectical unrest and ontological instability at the womb of being, and dialectic is thus the way man wages war with himself and permanent debate with what merely is....The only correspondence which can satisfy consciousness is correspondence with itself, the dynamic correspondence of subject which rejects any cessation of activity....

Reflection linked with action has the power to dissolve the world as it immediately presents itself, and to reinstate it on a new foundation. Hegel is, undoubtedly, an idealist. But his idealism is of a highly qualified sort. He never denies that the world, or the individual object of perception, begins as external to the knower. But objects need not remain merely as we find them. Thus Hegel views the domestication of the world by knowledge and work to have ontological status; it transforms and humanizes the world, and makes it available for
complete, certain, and scientific knowledge. Reflection, linked with the praxis that grows from it, becomes the "ontological instability" that reorganizes reality itself.

Because there are no inherent limits to reflection, Hegel pushes its significance as far as he can. He concludes that humanity is able, potentially, to determine and arbitrate its world and its own existence. In the heady atmosphere of absolute consciousness, we become being and time. It is precisely because the human incorporates the ontological—in the sense that "existence precedes essence"—that a final mediation between subject and object, thought and world is possible. The goal and the basis of Hegel's whole system, then, is a new kind of individual, reflectively aware of his world and his possibilities, and thus able to live ontologically.

In a way, the discovery by consciousness that its primordial self is reflection, and that reflection is inherently infinite in its capacities and demands, is absolute knowledge: for in this self-appraisal consciousness understands itself and its capacity to recollect and assimilate all human experience. In another sense, however, absolute knowledge only becomes possible with this discovery, since the subject must now turn back, understand humanity's early achievements and failures, and develop them into a comprehensive system. Hegel's interpretation of subjectivity is the result of his phenomenology, but not its final result; for this discovery initiates a return to the phenomena with the absolute perspective as a firm possession of the philosophic observer.

Having redefined subjectivity, Hegel must in turn redefine intersubjectivity. In the course of mind's historical progression, the subject encounters objects, and even systems of objects. But it also encounters other subjects. The result is not immediate recognition, but a complex struggle. Recognition, however, is another way in which subjectivity can expand itself. Thus consciousness evolves toward a community of free, mutually aware subjects. Hegel calls this world-design "spirit":

this absolute substance, which is the unity of the different self-related and self-existent self-consciousnesses in the perfect freedom and independence of their opposition as component elements of that substance: Ego that is "we," a plurality of Egos, and "we" that is a single Ego. Consciousness first finds in self-consciousness—the notion of Geist [spirit]—its turning point...and steps into the spiritual daylight of the present.12

Spirit is reflection in the form of a living, self-conscious community. It is politics conceived of as thought and action conjoined. In the course of the Phenomenology Hegel introduces such concrete social and political forms as the state, civil society, the bourgeoisie, labor, in the final synthetic chapters, these forms do not explicitly reappear. Yet they are preserved implicitly, as the action of "spirit certain of itself," or "conscience." This type of personality, with its characteristic "world-spirit," ties together the concrete realms of civil society and
the state by making them self-conscious actions rather than external, passively accepted institutions. This is synthesis by means of praxis, which then becomes a new synthesis on the theoretical level:

The "fact itself" has substantiality in general in the ethical order, external existence in culture, self-knowing essence of thought in morality; and in conscience it is the Subject, which knows these moments within itself.13

Spirit, then, finds its authentic existence as a self-conscious community in which each individual, certain of himself as free subjectivity, joins with other individuals in a political unity. Spirit is a particular mode of social existence. But it is also a mode of knowledge. The unity of the egos in their active lives makes possible a unity of differentiated sciences, arts, and skills as well, according to the same dialectical principle. The individuals unify by achieving mutual recognition as free and universal "spirits." The sciences come together when spirit is seen to underlie all cultural creations. Since man creates culture in all its multiplicity, man himself is the unity behind the multiplicity. When all sciences are seen as outgrowths of spirit, they can be reformulated to reflect that initial unity. Spirit is, then, both implicit in the sciences from the beginning, and made explicit as the final result of theoretical activity.

Once spirit shows itself to be the underlying principle of culture, we realize that only spirit as a whole has a history and makes history possible.14 There is now no separate history of philosophy, law, medicine, physics, or whatever. They all arise from the same principle and embody it, no matter how complex and internally differentiated that embodiment may become. Their independence is both cancelled, as substantive distinction, and preserved, in the form of simple distinctions within a systematic whole.

The complex and fluid nature of this synthetic process is best captured in Hegel's own words:

...the arrangement now assumed by the forms and shapes which have thus far appeared, is different from the way they appeared in their own order....in the series we considered, each moment, exhaustively elaborating its entire content, evolved and formed itself into a single whole within its own peculiar principle. And knowledge was the inner depth, or the spirit, wherein the moments, having no subsistence of their own, possessed their substance. This substance, however, has now at length made its appearance; it is the deep life of spirit certain of itself; it does not allow the principle belonging to each individual form to get isolated, and become a whole within itself: rather it collects all these moments into its own content, keeps them together, and advances with this total wealth of its concrete actual spirit; while all its particular moments take into themselves and receive together in common the like determinate character of the whole.15

Hegel makes it clear that this new development entails the structural reorganization of the world-concepts that have appeared in the course of the dialectic:
Thus while the previous linear series in its advance marked the retrogressive steps in it by knots, but thence went forward again in one linear stretch, it is now, as it were, broken at these knots, these universal moments, and falls asunder into many lines, which, being bound together into a single bundle, combine at the same time symmetrically, so that the similar distinctions, in which each separately took shape within its own sphere, meet together.16

These passages indicate a new transparency of moments occurring in the final stages of Hegel’s dialectic. It takes place explicitly in formulations like the above, and implicitly by allusion to the world-views that must now be drawn up and incorporated into the final system. The structure of allusions makes each world-view complete and transparent, so that all can be seen and known simultaneously. This is something like Levi-Strauss’ conception of the multidimensional, interconnected structure of meanings to be found by the study of comparative mythology. But in Hegel structure and dynamics (both in logic and in phenomena) must be more completely reconciled:

For the rest, it is self-evident from the whole argument, how this co-ordination of universal directions, just mentioned, is to be understood; so that it becomes superfluous to remark that these distinctions are to be taken to mean essentially and only moments of the process of development, not parts. In the case of actual concrete spirit they are attributes of its substance; in religion, on the other hand, they are only predicates of the subject. In the same way, indeed, all forms in general are, in themselves for us, contained in spirit and contained in every spirit.17

Hegel’s solution seems simple enough in principle. By positing subject as of equal ontological status with substance, Hegel sets the stage for subject’s mastery of substance through labor and thought. The synthesis here is more fundamental, perhaps, but is no different from the syntheses spirit achieves in all its relations. But the resolution is complex in execution and filled with ambiguities. Hegel gathers together the universal truths that have emerged within each "shape" the world has assumed for consciousness. But these truths emerged from contradictions, and Hegel draws up those contradictions as well. Rather than merely gathering universals in an additive fashion, absolute knowledge incorporates universals still embedded in essential conflicts. Absolute knowledge, then, as a new world-design, faces a number of tasks:

1. It must be the fulfillment of freedom, and therefore the supercession of all forms of dependence and necessity.

2. It must fully establish the liberty and fraternity of all self-conscious beings.

3. It must abolish all substantial otherness, yet ground the "substantiality" of the world.
4. In a parallel way, it must abolish all alien self-consciousness--that is, announce the "death of God" and yet preserve the force of the divine.

5. It must resolve the conflict between family and state as universal forces.

6. It must relate particularity and universality within the individual.

7. It must overcome the conflict within one's universality between thought and action.

8. It must abolish all forms of "false consciousness"--all partial perspectives--in a comprehensive and systematic grasp of reality as a unified "field" of meaning.

These conflicts have been preserved in the dialectic, and now appear as a unified problematic. Rather than a mere collection of problems, absolute knowledge confronts a system of problems. Note that each conflict emerged as part of a "world"--a unified way of life--and is thus already a conflict beyond the perspective of any single academic discipline. The aspect of "preservation" in the term synthesis refers, in this regard, to the uplifting of contradictions within these world-structures rather than their simple resolution within each individual structure.

This fact can be a source of confusion, The labor of subjectivity is necessary at every point in the Phenomenology, and as a true labor it changes the nature of each problem. These transformations sometimes appear to be final resolutions: the "Unhappy Consciousness" seems to have completely disappeared in "Reason as Observer," with its special kind of self-confidence. But the truth of the "Unhappy Consciousness," the inner conflict between particularity and universality, reappears in other forms. Truth keeps appearing in the form of contradiction. Yet it cannot remain in that form.

Once again, the solution results from the power of reflection. Since subjectivity has proven to be the historical ground of contradiction itself, it can in principle cancel it out. In terms of concrete existence, or praxis, this means creating a civilization in which contradictions left over from earlier stages of social development are resolved in new institutions and social relations. In terms of theory, it means developing an extension of social thought in which the contradictions retain only relativistic truth, and take their place as distinctions within the extended theory. The way Newtonian mechanics has been both superceded and preserved in contemporary physics is a good example of the process Hegel has in mind.

The resolution of the problematic is, then, a unified "wisdom" resulting from a fusion of world-designs, of actual ways of life embodied in historical examples. The fusion recasts recurrent problems, and resolves them by the
creation of a comprehensive world-view, which Hegel calls Science, and an authentic mode of existence.\textsuperscript{18}

The dialectic now interweaves the two basic themes, the actional and the theoretical, in a new way. Absolute knowledge depends upon the existence of a special kind of community, the modern state. Hegel sees that community taking form, primarily through the political and military achievements of Napoleon.\textsuperscript{19} The Emperor's major work, in Hegel's view, is the stabilization and institutionalization of the French Revolution. The result is a commonwealth that contains revolutionary (and thus dialectical) principles within its own structure. Only such a "revolutionary" commonwealth can resolve the eight problems and all the correlative tasks inherent in the absolute.\textsuperscript{20}

What were conflicts become conditions and coordinations. Thus the reality of distinction and process is never completely lost, even when we have achieved Hegel's "absolute." The struggle for recognition, which began as a struggle to the death and evolved into the oft-cited master-slave relationship, is repeated and preserved as a stage in the education of every citizen. The confrontation between owner and worker becomes a coordination of labor and administration, mediated by public authority. Spirit is made to exist in the daily life of the political community, as well as in the theoretical reflections on that life. The existence of systematic knowledge is related to and dependent on its enactment in a political system. That final fusion of knowledge and ethical action completes absolute knowledge as a world-view grounded in a humanized world. It dialectically reveals the result of reflection's slow permeation and mastery of its world. It delivers to the individual the result of the historical experiences of the species. When this occurs in absolute knowledge, it constitutes the final achievement of the dialectical process: the vision of our full selfhood as world-historical spirit. This depends on a rare and radical effort of recollection, directed not only toward narrative history, but toward our deepest ontological soundings in moments of existential choice and action. Thus absolute knowledge is only in one sense the creation of a unified science. It is also a new form of immediate consciousness, a new spiritual community, and a new way of life.\textsuperscript{21}

Absolute Spirit...turns to itself, to its own peculiar world, in the actual present....it thus discovers this world in the living present to be its own property; and so has taken the first step to descend from the ideal intelligible world, or rather to quicken the abstract element of the intelligible world with concrete selfhood.\textsuperscript{22}

Once absolute knowledge has emerged as a world-view—the "last embodiment of spirit"\textsuperscript{23}—it can then be expressed as an abstract system. This is why the Phenomenology remains, for all its length and complexity, an introduction to the Hegelian philosophy. Yet in some respects it is more than an introduction, since in presenting absolute knowledge as a mode of self-consciousness Hegel has already sketched out the abstractions from which the final system will coalesce. The task of building the complete integrative system is
clearly announced in the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology*, and carried out in the *Logic*, the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, and the other works of Hegel's philosophic maturity. There Hegel reformulates the specific disciplines with which we are familiar. But all of these later studies rest on the principles Hegel uncovers and tests in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

The Hegelian approach became quite influential during Hegel's lifetime, and in the period immediately following his death in 1831. But eventually the Hegelian school lost its coherence and much of its intellectual force. Hegel was severely criticized by scholars who found his method suspect and his final system unacceptable. Much of the criticism, however, was directed at the Hegel of the *Logic*, without a preliminary understanding of the phenomenological principles that make the *Logic* possible. More recently, scholars have found new coherence and relevance in Hegel's work. By pioneering the search for integrative knowledge, Hegel proves himself to be our intellectual contemporary. The same rejection of fragmentation that he stated so forcefully now motivates the interdisciplinary movement. To the modern interdisciplinary scholar, Hegel offers metaphysical grounds for unitary science, and a methodology carefully conceived and consistently applied. His efforts, adapted to our own needs, can make a significant contribution to interdisciplinary thought.
NOTES


²Ibid., p. 808.

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴Ibid., p. 85.


⁶Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 80.


⁸Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 80.


¹¹Walter Davis, personal communication.


¹³Ibid., pp. 651-52.

¹⁴Lukas, *The Young Hegel*, p. 466.

¹⁵Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 691.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 692.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 801.


²⁰Ibid., pp. 33-37.
