Writing in 1946, Merleau-Ponty declared that “all the great philosophical ideas of the past century – the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel.” (Merleau-Ponty, “Hegel’s Existentialism”, p. 63) Although this is in some respects an exaggeration, Merleau-Ponty’s assessment is nonetheless broadly speaking correct, and indeed some other schools of thought, such as critical theory, could perhaps be added to the list. Hegel’s work provides the background against which the major developments in European ideas since 1831 have emerged, and for many of the philosophers to be discussed in this book, only once they had come to terms with Hegel could their own thinking begin. Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty observes, “interpreting Hegel means taking a stand on all the philosophical, political, and religious problems of our century”, for often the central debates within post-Hegelian continental philosophy have been couched in terms of competing readings of his work. Hegel is therefore a good place to start for two reasons: firstly, because he decisively influenced the thinking of those who came after him, if only negatively, and secondly because so much European philosophy has been written by developing different aspects of his thought, and by providing competing approaches to problems in his terms.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was born in 1770, and was part of an important generation of German thinkers which included the poet Hölderlin and the philosopher Schelling, both of whom Hegel knew from his youth in Tübingen, where they had all attended the Protestant theological college together. Although later on personal and philosophical differences came between them, in the early years they shared a deep concern with the revolution in France, an impatience with the orthodox theology they were taught at Tübingen, a dissatisfaction with Kant’s philosophy, and a desire to overcome the fragmentations and divisions they perceived in the social and intellectual outlook of their times. In an early work, published after he was reunited with Schelling in Jena in 1801, Hegel states that “[t]he sole interest of reason” is to “suspend” the antithesis between “spirit and matter, soul and body, faith and intellect, freedom and necessity” (Hegel, The Difference, p. 90), arguing that “[d]ichotomy is the source of the need of philosophy” (The Difference, p. 89). These dichotomies – and there were others, such as that between the individual and society –
were perceived as dividing man from his environment, from his fellow man and from God, and as such it was a primary concern of Hegel and his contemporaries to overcome these oppositions in a more unified world-view.

The poets and philosophers of Hegel’s period characteristically identified the Greeks as having possessed such a unity in their social, religious and philosophical outlook, so that the ancient world came to represent for them a lost but exquisite flowering of this desired unity. The emergence of the divided and alienated world-view held by “us moderns” was felt to represent a fall from the innocent harmony of the Greek world, which – as in Genesis – could be explained by the awakening in man of the faculty of knowledge, or (more particularly) by the awakening of the sort of reflective self-consciousness which leads to the loss of our original sense of the unity of things. It is important to note, however, that while blaming reflective understanding for this, Hegel nonetheless saw that this mode of thought could not now be given up, and instead believed that the dichotomies it had generated should be resolved in a higher form of knowledge, in which the unified outlook of the Greeks is restored, but at a higher level of understanding and awareness. As we shall see, Hegel shared the confidence expressed here by Hölderlin in the concluding lines of his poetic novel Hyperion, that all the contradictions and dichotomies suffered by us moderns could be overcome:

Like lovers’ quarrels are the dissonances of the world. Reconciliation is there, even in the midst of strife, and all things that are parted find one another again. The arteries separate and return to the heart and all is one eternal glowing life. So I thought. More soon. (Hölderlin, Hyperion, p. 170)

The Phenomenology of Spirit

Hegel’s thought is notorious for its systematic and all-inclusive nature, a feature which characterises his work from around 1801 onwards. In the Jena lectures of 1803–6, which he delivered as a Privatdozent or unsalaried lecturer, he put forward the outlines of his early philosophical system. While at Jena he wrote his first major work, the Phenomenology of Spirit. (‘Spirit’ is one possible translation of the German word Geist, a term that has no exact equivalent in English, and which can also be rendered as ‘mind’.) The publication of the Phenomenology was delayed until 1807, as Hegel was forced to leave the city in the wake of the Napoleon’s defeat of the Prussians at the battle of Jena, and move to