

Chapter 25

Hegel's Absolute Idealism and the Phenomenology of Spirit

Key Words: Absolute idealism, contradictions, antinomies, Spirit, Absolute, absolute idealism, teleological causality, objective mind, universal mind, phenomenology of mind, consciousness, self-consciousness, reason.

Hegel's absolute idealism tries to arrive at an all-encompassing theory to bridge the finite with the infinite. He proclaims that, only the whole is real and hence all particular facts and concepts are incomplete and only partially true. Hegel advances a very interesting theory, which considers contradictions as natural. This is contrary to the traditional philosophical views, which considered contradictions as problematic, and something they need to be necessarily avoided. Hegel's new way of thinking suggests that we can take the irrational approach of contradicting ourselves. He thus proposes to resolve the problem of antinomies exposed by the Kantian framework. Kant has shown that pure reason encounters antinomies when it tries to prove things, which are not given to us through the forms of sensibility and the conceptual categories. We thus encounter certain irresolvable contradictions. Kant suggests that to avoid this situation we should keep away from such ventures. He declares the impossibility of metaphysics as a science based on this scenario.

Hegel on the other hand approaches reason from a different perspective. He was not prepared to accept the traditional view about the nature of reason, where the latter is conceived as a static faculty. His idealistic view states that cosmic history consists in the life story of spirit or *Geist*, which is the *absolute*. He conceived the *Geist* as rational and hence essentially dynamic. Hegel's idealism asserts that the absolute encompasses everything. In Hegel's own words, "everything that from eternity has happened in heaven and earth, the life of God and all the deeds of time are simply the struggles of Spirit to know itself and to find itself." This Spirit is universal and is concrete within itself. As mentioned above the Spirit is a process and hence is dynamic and its

intelligent comprehension of itself is at the same time the progression of the total evolving reality.

Hegel divides philosophy into three broad categories: logic, naturphilosophy and the philosophy of the *Geist*. Logic consists of the account of the forms of thought, naturphilosophie deals with the natural sciences, as the manifestation of the forms of thought in the objective world and philosophy of *Geist* deals with the manifestation of the forms of thought in society. We can see that all the three sections deal with forms of thought and the fundamental unity of the rational forms. Hegel affirms that everything coincides in the Absolute.

The Absolute is conceived by Hegel as the ultimately real, which is the whole process that encompasses, the subjective and the objective, internal and external and all the three dimensions of time. It is a complex organic system constituted of individual separate things that are real. The reality of these separate things consists in them being an aspect of the whole. In this sense, the absolute incorporates both the finite and the infinite and it bridges the finite with the infinite.

Hegel is careful in providing an account of the *Geist*. It is not the reality that appears before us. He thus categorizes the phenomena that appears before us as inferior or even not completely real, although his all-encompassing theory is not prepared to conceive the appearances as completely unreal. But he opposes the prevailing model of cognition advocated by the enlightenment rationality. Hegel proposes to turn inward to our understanding to arrive at the true source of philosophical knowledge. In this process of philosophical contemplation, one may encounter contradictions, as one is focusing solely on understanding. Hegel argues that we have to allow contradictions to take place and reconcile them. We have to allow the process to progress and manifest itself in thinking and in reality.

Here the concept of reality advocated by Hegel is unique and different. He argues that it is governed by the principle of teleological causality and not mechanical efficient causality. He affirms that, in this process, the meaning of each stage is realized in the whole, which is rational. Hegel thus suggests a revision of the conception of rationality, particularly the sort of which was

advocated by Kant and many other enlightenment thinkers. He endeavours to overcome the Kantian separation of the noumena and phenomena and finite and infinite that ultimately draws limits to rational thinking.

The most important feature of this idealism is the conception of the Spirit as activity. In this conception, Hegel is visibly influenced by Aristotle and proposes a principle of teleological causality. In Aristotle's philosophy we find an identification of the fully substantial being with spirit, which in its essence is activity. Aristotle explains the process of evolution with the help of the concepts of potentiality and actuality and also with the idea of the principle of causation that functions everywhere in terms of the four principles; formal, material, efficient and final causes. Accordingly, in this teleological conception, things have necessary meanings and every process that happens in the world are rational, purposive and with full of meaning.

In Aristotle's framework, since reality is rational we can understand it. It is therefore reflected in a unity of logic and metaphysics. According to the teleological process, reality, world, thought and reason are not static, but are dynamic and they move and evolve. The changes are not arbitrary but meaningful and hence all changes are part of the evolutionary process, which is meaningful and teleological. In the process of evolution, something that is undeveloped, undifferentiated, homogeneous, and hence abstract, develops, differentiates, splits up, and assumes many different forms.

The recognition of such diversity and differences is essential for adopting a teleological approach. The possibility of these different finite forms contradicting each other is not ruled out. But Hegel argues that these finite forms are finally unified. The absolute is thus a unity in diversity. Hegel declares that the Real is Rational and rational is Real. According to him, the absolute spirit, or God, is the ultimate reality, which is the *Geist* or objective mind. Therefore, reality is a complex totality of rational concepts constituting absolute spirit.

Hegel maintains that, contrary to the finite minds of humans, which are nothing, but manifestations of the universal, objective mind, this totality of thought is absolute and infinite. He thus conceives reality, which is rational as

the conceptual totality and an integrated and total structure of conceptual truths.

This rational Absolute or the universal mind, which constitutes the totality of conceptual truths, reveals itself in all areas of human experience and knowledge. It includes everything. Since it is rational, it includes the vast structure of rational concepts that is present in all areas. Hegel maintains that, though the Absolute is infinite and universal, it is not different from what is existent. He thus affirms that the rational is the existent object more deeply understood. It encompasses the deeper understanding of the vast realms of physical and organic nature and society. The rational concepts are not independent or transcendental, apart from the concrete world; instead, they constitute the rational core of the world of things.

As discussed in the previous chapter, contrary to Kant, who held that the noumena or the real is unknowable, Hegel holds that reality is knowable, since its rational structures are knowable. We have also seen how this process happens and how is it known by employing the dialectic method. Hegel argues that, owing to its comprehensiveness, all our concepts express modes of being, and are transformations of the idea of being. Hence in the absolute, which is a process, every newly evolving stage contains all the preceding stages and foreshadows all the future ones. Every finite stage is both a product and a prophecy. We have examined in the previous chapter how the lower forms are not only negated in the higher forms but also are preserved. The lower forms were carried over and sublated in the higher.

As indicated above, ends or purposes are realized in the process of evolution. Hegel says that, the purposes of universal reason are realized in the process. According to him, the truth lies in the whole, which is the truth of the organism. The absolute is a spiritual and logical process of evolution and in order to comprehend reality, we need to experience this process in ourselves by reproducing the rational necessity in all thought and in reality in our thinking by the dialectic. Thinking, like reality itself, evolves rationally, moves logically, genetically and dialectically. Hegel further maintains that the absolute or *Geist* is the creative logos or reason and it contains in it the entire logical-

dialectical process which unfolds itself in a world. All the laws of its evolution are outlined in the Absolute and hence find expression in the form of objective existence.

Hegel's conception of God calls our attention once again in this context. Contrary to the predominant view held by enlightenment reason, Hegel does not conceive God as separate from the world. On the other hand, God is the living and moving reason of the world. God reveals himself in the world, in nature and in history. According to him, nature and history are necessary stages in the evolution of God into self-consciousness. At the same time, Hegel is not prepared to accept a complete absorption of the world into God. He rather maintains that, God cannot be without creating a world and without knowing himself in his other in the dialectic.

The absolute is therefore, a unity in opposition, as it includes the world, God and the human mind. The usual theological hierarchy where man is placed below God is therefore, not found in Hegel in its strict form. He holds that the human mind is not a mere inferior dependent entity. According to him the divine Idea is enriched by its self-expressions in nature and history. Through them it rises to self-consciousness. Hegel describes this process of evolution, a phenomenon where the absolute thinks itself in its object. It comes to know its own essence only in evolution and this happens only in man. It is only in the human mind's thinking process which is dialectical the absolute realizes its essence.

Hegel thus interestingly maintains that in all aspects of human life; in nature itself, in individuals, human institutions, history, law, morality, custom, ethical observances of human beings, we find nothing but the expression of universal reason. He says that, in all such instance the universal spirit realizes its purpose in a rational dialectical movement. The culmination point of this process is the absolute mind. It is therefore, the supreme stage in the evolution of the logical idea. This absolute mind involves everything. The phenomenology of Spirit, which is an attempt to outline the biography of the spirit of humanity will explain this further.

The Phenomenology of Spirit

The phenomenology of spirit outlines the evolution of the human spirit from lesser stages of existence and realization to higher and ultimately to the highest stage. The human mind, according to Hegel, undergoes this process in its evolution to its highest potential and he attempts to trace it. This is very important in Hegelian philosophy, because according to him, it is only in the human mind the absolute Spirit comes to know its own essence in evolution. In a sense it is a description of the history of consciousness.

Phenomenology is a science of consciousness that tries to study the mind in relation to external or internal objects. Hegel argues that the history of consciousness has three main parts which correspond to the three main phases of consciousness: consciousness, self-consciousness and reason. In this process, the mind evolves to higher and higher stages of consciousness.

The first is the stage of consciousness, which is also the stage of sense-certainty. Here the mind is aware of the presence of other objects around it. It uncritically apprehends particular objects by the senses. The knowledge gained from sensations are conceived here as the most certain and basic. Hegel then points out the inadequacies and limitations of this stage. He says that, in order to describe such an object of immediate acquaintance we need to employ universal categories. For example, when we say that there are five fingers in a hand, we employ universal categories of quantity, quality, modality, relations etc., which Kant had demonstrated in his first *Critique*. For the mind to categorize the sensible knowledge as something we need to apply certain *a priori* categories that it derives from itself. In science, for instance, we invoke metaphenomenal or unobservable entities to explain sense phenomena. To understand the source of these *a priori* structures, consciousness has to turn back on itself and become self-conscious. To summarise this process, we may say that, sense certainty can say THAT an object is, but not WHAT it is.

In the stage of self-consciousness, the self is concerned with the external object. This is a more advanced state where the self subordinates the object to itself. It approaches the object in order to comprehend it, use it to its purposes, tries to appropriate it and consume it. This process thus assumes a one-sided action of the subject over the object. But this process is obstructed when the

self confronts other selves, which are not mere objects in the world. Here the self encounters other selves, an encounter which makes it uncomfortable, as it realizes that it cannot approach other self as an object. It cannot objectify another subject, owing to its subjectivity. Again, since, the other is also a subject, which confronts the world of objects including one's own self/subjectivity, it may possibly make one an object of its comprehension; it may objectify the subjectivity of one's self. Consequently, the self feels a desire to cancel out or annihilate the other self as a means to assert its own selfhood. It seeks to annihilate the subjectivities of the other selves, by enslaving them.

Hegel argues that, this endeavour to cancel others' subjectivity is bound to be counterproductive, as the consciousness of one's own selfhood presupposes the recognition of this selfhood by another self. In other words, to be recognized as a subject I need another subject who recognizes me as a subject. For this one needs others to remain as subjects and not just entities which have lost their subjectivity (a slave). To further explicate this position, Hegel refers to the master-slave relationship.

In the stage of self-consciousness, one is intimidated by the presence of other subjects, who can cancel one's subjectivity. The other, who is not just an object and is a subject, may enslave one. Here one may try to enslave the other in order to assert one's own self-hood and freedom. The other is perceived as a threat to one's freedom and the only way out seems to be consisting in enslaving the other by taking away the latter's freedom and not recognizing the latter's personhood. Here one enslaves the other and becomes a master and does not recognize the latter as a real person. But by doing this the master deprives himself of that recognition of his own freedom, which he wanted to be preserved. This freedom was precious for him because it was essential for the development of self-consciousness. The paradox of enslaving the other is that, in this process, the master becomes dependent on the slave for asserting his self-hood. In order to assert one's freedom one enslaves another person and then ironically becomes dependent on the slave and loses one's freedom. The slave on the other hand frees himself through labour, which transforms material things.

Hegel summons that, the final solution to this problem consists, not in enslaving the other but in recognizing the latter's subjectivity. But, as pointed out above, this may pose a threat to one's freedom, as the other as a distinct individual subject poses a threat to one's self-hood. Hegel here proposes to graduate to the highest stage of evolution, reason, where the other and oneself are being recognized as manifestations of the same universal mind.

Reason therefore, is the ultimate stage, where the finite subject rises to universal self-consciousness. It consists in the realization that we are all manifestations of the universal Spirit. This stage is not characterized by the one-sided awareness of oneself as an individual subject threatened by and in conflict with other self-conscious beings. On the other hand, it involves a full recognition of selfhood in oneself and in others. The highest stage of reason is therefore, a synthesis of the first two stages of consciousness and self-consciousness. In consciousness, the subject is aware of the sensible object as something external and heterogeneous to itself. In self-consciousness, the subject's attention is turned back on itself as a finite self. And finally in reason, the subject sees everything as the objective expression of infinite Spirit with which it is itself united.

Quiz

1. Which of the following is true of Hegel's idealism?
[a] The absolute encompasses only the objective and not the subjective aspects [b] Absolute bridges the finite with the infinite [c] Absolute is a simple system without parts [c] Absolute is different from God.
2. Which of the following is not true?
[a] The absolute is a unity in diversity [b] Real is Rational and rational is Real [c] Absolute spirit is the ultimate reality [d] Absolute Spirit and God are different.
3. According to Hegel, reality is:
[a] A manifestation of the universal mind [b] An integrated and total structure of conceptual truth [c] A totality of abstract minds [d] The ideal universal Spirit which is different from the existing world.
4. According to Hegel, God is:
[a] The living and moving reason of the world [b] Separate from the world [c] The creator of the world [d] Does not reveal himself in the world.
5. What does not characterize the stage of consciousness?

[a] It is a stage of self-certainty [b] The mind is aware of the presence of other objects [c] The mind subordinates the object it experiences to itself. [d] The mind tries to use objects to its purposes.

6. What does not happen in the stage of reason?
[a] The finite subject rises to universal self-consciousness [b] The finite subject realizes itself as a manifestation of the universal Spirit [c] The finite subject tries to enslave others. [d] One recognizes the selfhood in oneself and in others.

Answer Key

1. [b]
2. [d]
3. [b]
4. [a]
5. [c]
6. [c]

Assignments

1. Discuss Hegel's conception of Absolute.
2. Describe the phenomenology of spirit.

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