
UNIT 4 G.W. HEGEL

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Hegel's Metaphysical Foundations
- 4.3 '*The Phenomenology of Spirit*' and Concept of Absolute
- 4.4 '*The Philosophy of Nature*' and Organic System
- 4.5 '*Philosophy of Spirit*' and Dialectic Method
- 4.6 Hegel's Contribution to Philosophy
- 4.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.8 Key Words
- 4.9 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

Hegel was the last of the main representatives of a philosophical movement known as German Idealism. Hegel's thoughts on the history of philosophy made that topic a philosophical discipline in its own right. The unit elaborates on the philosophical contribution of Hegel through his three major works such as *phenomenology of Spirit*, *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Spirit*, from where his idea of the dynamic Absolute, organic physics and Dialectic method concretely emerged.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Hegel was born on 27 August 1770 in Stuttgart, son of a Württemberg official. In autumn 1793, after successfully completing this period of study, Hegel became a private tutor in Berne, Switzerland, and remained there until 1796. Thanks to a legacy, Hegel was able to abandon his position as a tutor and pursue his academic ambitions. With Schelling's energetic support Hegel qualified as a Privatdozent in the autumn of 1801 with a thesis on natural philosophy. Initially, Schelling and Hegel worked closely together, a fact which is documented by a philosophical periodical which they published jointly from 1802 (although it ceased publication following Schelling's departure from Jena in 1803). In 1805 Hegel was appointed Extraordinary Professor, but financial difficulties forced him to abandon his activities at the University of Jena in the autumn of 1806. In November 1808 the same friend then ensured that Hegel was nominated rector and professor at a grammar school in Nuremberg. After a few years in this capacity, Hegel was able to return to university life. Hegel died in Berlin during a cholera epidemic on 14 November 1831, at the height of his fame.

Hegel devoted his life wholly to academic pursuits. Hegel's works can be divided into three groups: (1) texts written by Hegel and published during his lifetime; (2) texts written by him, but not published during his lifetime; and (3) texts

neither written by him nor published during his lifetime. His science of logic, dialectical reasoning, encyclopaedia of philosophical sciences, philosophy of Right – all provide an intellectual foundation for modern nationalism. Hegel was an idealist who methodically constructed a comprehensive system of thought about the world. Compared to other philosophers, it is rather very difficult and harder to understand Hegel. He differs from Parmenides and Spinoza in conceiving the whole, not as a simple substance, but as complex system like an organism. In Hegel's view, world is not an illusion. The apparently separate things of the world have a greater or a lesser degree of reality and their reality exists in the aspect of the whole. Hegel calls, 'The Whole', in all its complexity as 'The Absolute'.

4.2 HEGEL'S METAPHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS

Hegel's systematic philosophy attempts to comprehend reality in all its manifestations as a self-representation of reason (*Vernunft*). His conception of what he calls 'reason' combines various specifically Hegelian connotations, both ontological and epistemological. Reason is reality, and that alone is truly real which is reasonable. At least three different convictions make up this basic precept of the ontological dignity of reason. Hegel calls this primary structure 'the absolute' or 'reason'. For Hegel, therefore, this conviction does not require detailed philosophical justification. Hegel's second important conviction relates to the internal constitution of the structure which he characterizes as reason. He understands this structure to be a complex unity of thinking and being. The third conviction which enters into Hegel's basic assumption of reason as the primary structure constituting reality and thus being ultimately and only real is that this structure constitutes reality and thus its own objectivity in a teleological process which must be understood as a process of knowledge. It is this conviction which leads to the characteristically Hegelian dogma that there can be no adequate theory of reality without a dynamic or process-oriented ontology. This process is described as 'self-knowledge of reason' (*Selbsterkenntnis der Vernunft*). Hegel tries to integrate within this formula various aspects of his conception of reason. The first aspect is that it is necessary to take reason, understood as the primary structure, as something which is essentially dynamic. The second aspect Hegel has in mind when he speaks of 'self-knowledge of reason', describing a process which must indeed be understood as that of the self-realization of reason, is that this process represents a process of recognition for reason. The project of exhibiting reason not only as the basis for all reality, but also as the whole of reality itself, was Hegel's sole, lifelong philosophical goal.

4.3 'THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT' AND CONCEPT OF ABSOLUTE

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is Hegel's most influential work. It serves as an introduction to his philosophical system by means of a history of the experience of consciousness. A discipline which Hegel calls 'logic' is intended to fulfil its introductory function by raising our 'normal' thinking, which is characterized by its confinement to irreconcilable oppositions, to the level of 'speculation,' Hegel's term for philosophical thinking. For him, 'reflection' is that thinking which by its insistence on oppositions simultaneously maintains their basic

irresolvability. According to Hegel, it is now the task of logic to carry out the destruction of the finiteness of reflection or of the thinking of the understanding, thereby simultaneously leading to the standpoint of speculation or of the thinking of reason.

In '*Phenomenology of Spirit*,' Hegel pursues this dual goal in a complex and ambitious thought-process, which attempts to combine and position within a comprehensive context a wide range of themes. This whole thought-process is based on two convictions which govern Hegel's entire construction: (1) It is possible to conceive of all epistemic attitudes of a consciousness towards a material world as relations between a subject termed 'cognition' (*Wissen*) and an object termed 'truth' (*Wahrheit*). For the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and of the writings which were to follow, knowledge in the strict sense is thus really self-knowledge. In characterizing the various epistemic attitudes of a consciousness to the world in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel takes as his starting point something which he calls 'sense certainty'. Hegel demonstrates the untenability of this attitude by attempting to prove that in such an immediate reference to objects nothing true can be claimed of them. According to Hegel, however, even this attitude is not tenable. Although, according to Hegel, this interpretation of the objective world through the cognizing subject also produces neither a truthful concept of the cognizing consciousness nor of the object in question, it none the less leads to the enforcement of an attitude according to which consciousness, when referring to an object, is referring to something which it is itself. The realization of this insight - that consciousness, when referring to objects, in reality relates to itself - converts consciousness into self-consciousness.

The various ways in which consciousness deals with itself and the objective manifestations corresponding with these ways as reason and spirit are comprehensively discussed by Hegel in the remainder of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The conclusion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* forms what Hegel calls 'absolute knowledge'. Hegel characterizes this knowledge also as 'comprehending knowledge' (*begreifendes Wissen*), aiming thereby to highlight two ideas: (1) that this knowledge is only present when the subject of the knowledge knows itself to be identical under every description with the object of that knowledge. From another point of view, Hegel describes the phenomenological process as 'self-fulfilling scepticism'. For Hegel, the modern age is characterized by the fact that unity has disappeared from people's lives. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes this process of destruction and foundation-laying. While the phenomenological process thus concedes a philosophical value to scepticism, in Hegel's understanding it simultaneously overcomes this scepticism by claiming a truth-revealing function for it. It is also Hegel's intention that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* should in this respect be understood as a treatise on the cathartic effect of philosophical scepticism.

Concept of Absolute

Absolute is not a Being separate from the world, nature or even individual persons, thus not making a sharp distinction between appearance and reality as in Plato's philosophy. In Hegel's view, nothing is unrelated and whatever we experience as separate things, will upon careful reflection, lead us to the other things to which they are related, until at last, the process of dialectical thought will end in the knowledge of the Absolute. Still, the Absolute is not a unity of separate things. Hegel describes the Absolute as a dynamic process,

as an organism having parts but nevertheless, unified into a complex system. Therefore, the Absolute is not an entity which is separate from the world as Kant's Noumena, but it is in the world in a special way.

4.4 'THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE' AND ORGANIC SYSTEM

Hegel's philosophy of nature is an attempt to explain how it is possible that we can recognize nature as a complex whole standing under a set of laws. Hegel's philosophy of nature is of interest mainly in three respects. The first concerns the way in which he transforms his logical theory into an interpretation of natural phenomena. The second relates to the question of how far Hegel's conceptions in the field of the philosophy of nature take into account the scientific theories current at the time. The third leads to the question of what we should make of Hegel's approach to a philosophy of nature within the framework of present-day philosophy of science. This way of looking at nature makes it the object of what Hegel calls 'mechanics'. Hegel's philosophy of nature consists of the so-called 'organic physics' or 'organics'. Hegel interprets subjectivity as an essential characteristic of organic life and nature as a hierarchy of organisms or as an 'organic system'. Hegel links the last part of his *philosophy of nature* to his *philosophy of spirit* by means of an analysis of the phenomenon of the death of an individual natural being.

The relation of the Absolute, the Whole to its parts like an organism – is the basic conception of Hegel's philosophy. The conception of the relation between the parts and the whole in an organism is extended by Hegel to all truth and reality. Hegel explains this organic theory of Truth and Reality with an example of a work of art. This reality is Absolute, Divine and Abstract, but it is Concretized through different types of expressions in nature and humans. It is 'thought - thinking' itself, 'a unity of the subjective and objective Idea'. According to Hegel, there is no truth except the whole truth. So, Absolute is the synthesis of Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit because, Reality is Rationality. Man's knowledge of the Absolute is actually the Absolute, knowing itself through the finite spirit of man.

Hegel believes that this Absolute is the ultimate reality, which passes through the different stages of development in time and becomes conscious of itself in human reason. Yet, this absolute is timeless, eternal, all embracing, self completed whole. The sense of fragmentation and discreteness is alien to the spirit of Hegel's philosophy. The self positing and self negating spirit of wholeness is the very nature of Hegelian reality. Man's unity with nature and Man's unity with his own self and other selves. According to Hegel world is intelligible, reason being at the heart of things. Man can understand this truth through its faculty of reason. Pure reason, as opposed to practical reason has formal existence, as opposed to material existence. Pure reason though is beyond space and time, it exists in the abstract sense with as much reality as the existence as the other concrete things. The reason for the world has a logical temporal priority to the world, just as a mathematical problem has a logical non-temporal priority for its solution. Hegel calls this Absolute – 'The Idea', 'The Spirit', 'The Mind' etc. In other respects, Hegel differs from Plato. 'The Idea' is not static and self subsistent. Hegel laid great stress upon logic believing that knowing and being coincide.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Hegel equate reason and reality?

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2) Explain Hegel’s organic theory.

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4.5 ‘PHILOSOPHY OF SPIRIT’ AND DIALECTIC METHOD

Hegel’s *philosophy of spirit* is divided into a theory of subjective, objective and absolute spirit. The philosophy of subjective spirit contains Hegel’s philosophical psychology; his philosophy of objective spirit is devoted to his theory of law and politics and his conception of world history; and his philosophy of absolute spirit presents his theory of art, religion and philosophy. Hegel presented his philosophy of subjective spirit and in particular his philosophy of absolute spirit to a wider public only in outline in a few paragraphs of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences. The philosophy of subjective spirit contains an anthropology, a phenomenology of spirit and a psychology. In these sections Hegel describes and analyses all the phenomena that influence the somatic, psychophysical and mental characteristics, conditions, processes and activities of the individual. While the philosophy of subjective spirit really only attracted attention up to the middle of the nineteenth century, Hegel’s philosophy of objective spirit, in other words his theory of law and politics, received a great deal of attention during the nineteenth and especially the twentieth century. Finally, the third conviction consists in an application of the principle which shapes Hegel’s whole philosophical enterprise, namely, that political philosophy must play its part in the confirmation of the thesis that only reason is real.

Hegel fulfils his self-imposed demand for the integration of freedom by making the conception of free will the fundamental concept of his philosophy of the objective spirit; this is where his characteristic conception of freedom comes into play. For Hegel, self-determination means to refer willingly to oneself, that is, to will oneself. In his theory of law, Hegel makes his contribution to the discussion of the philosophical foundations of civil and criminal law. According to Hegel, however, legal relationships and moral standards are founded in social institutions. In Hegel’s language, ethical life as the basis for the possibility of law and morality is the truth of free will, that which free will really is. For Hegel,

ethical life appears in three institutional forms: family, bourgeois society and the state. This diagnosis is grounded in Hegel's analyses of a society founded solely on economic relationships. Hegel thinks of the state as a constitutional monarchy with division of power. For Hegel, the constitution of a state is in no sense the product of some constitution-creating institution or the work of individual persons. Hegel's theory of the powers of the state (*Staatsgewalten*) recognizes, in addition to the princely power (*fürstliche Gewalt*) which represents the instance of ultimate decision-making within the constitutional framework, the governmental power (*Regierungsgewalt*) and the legislative power (*gesetzgebende Gewalt*). Hegel forges the link to his theory of the spirit, which contains his political philosophy, by interpreting what he calls 'ethical life' as the 'spirit of a people'. Now, Hegel believes that this development has taken place during the course of a historical process which he calls 'world history'. Hegel now interprets this reconciliation as the conclusion of the process of the self-recognition of reason.

Hegel's philosophy of absolute spirit contains his philosophy of art, his philosophy of religion and his theory of philosophy. Although from the very first all these subjects had a fixed place in Hegel's attempts at a system, and although his philosophies of art and religion were to become very influential (the one in the history of art and the theory of aesthetics and the other in theology), none the less these sections of Hegel's philosophy are relatively little elaborated in the works published by Hegel himself. In philosophy, the self-reference of reason is accounted for in the mode of cognition. By way of example Hegel takes the lion, which symbolizes strength. Hegel interprets the various individual arts as realizations of styles of art in various materials. Although each individual art can present itself in each style of art, there is for each individual art an ideal style, which he calls its basic type. The first individual art which Hegel discusses is architecture.

The remaining individual arts are painting, music and poetry, whose basic type is represented by the romantic style of art. Music is the romantic style of art par excellence. Hegel could not resist the temptation to use his theory of individual arts and styles of art as a model for the interpretation of the history of the development of art. In the philosophy of religion Hegel holds that only in Christianity are the conditions fulfilled which are characteristic of the representational self-knowledge of reason. Philosophy of religion has as its subject not only God, but also religion itself, and for Hegel that means the way in which God is present in the religious consciousness. The second part of the philosophy of religion discusses what Hegel calls 'determinate religion'. This exposition starts with so-called natural religion, which according to Hegel assumes three forms: the religion of magic, the religion of substantiality and the religion of abstract subjectivity. Natural religion finds its historical concept in the Oriental religions. Hegel regards the 'religions of spiritual individuality' as a second stage; these assume the forms of the religion of sublimity, the religion of beauty and the religion of teleology. Hegel puts the Jewish, Greek and Roman religions in this category. According to Hegel, this idea of religion was first realized adequately in Christianity. Hegel's philosophy of religion greatly influenced theological discussions and points of view. Philosophy is the representation of this process in its necessity. This philosophical process also has its appearance in time in the form of the history of philosophy. Only in societies in which free constitutions exist can philosophical thought develop. Hegel divides Western philosophy into two main periods: Greek

and Germanic philosophy. Hegel regards it as a great merit of his philosophy that it adequately explains this, and thus reconciles reason with reality in thought.

Dialectic Method

Every thesis for an argument has its anti thesis as life and death, love and hate, day and night, youth and old age. Whole nature is a reconciliation of opposites and Hegel's dialectic shows that any thesis implies its anti thesis and that the two are united in a higher synthesis in which the opposition between the two is reconciled and overcome in a larger unity. The Absolute Idea passes through a dialectic of many triads – each of which has its own Thesis, Anti Thesis and Synthesis. In the thesis, a certain aspect of reality is revealed and in the anti thesis, a contrasting aspect appears and the two are synthesised in a higher synthesis. Hegel uses the term *Abstract* or *Immediate* to thesis and *Negative* or *Mediate* to anti thesis and *Concrete* to synthesis. Hegel's concept begins with the concept of *being* and this is the thesis. Hegel believed that the inner essence of the absolute could be reached by human reason because the Absolute is disclosed in nature as well as in the working of the human mind. What connects these three – the Absolute, nature and man's mind is thought itself. Nature is the *objective self*, as opposed to the *conscious self*. The second basic triad of nature is matter, life and mind. In matter, the thesis we do find that parts are related mechanically and in life, the anti thesis, they are united organically. The higher concept, mind is a union of matter and life. Mind or the subjective spirit is the synthesis of the evolution of matter and life. This mind in man is capable of controlling both the material body and the principle of life in man. In fact, the mind is the union of both matter and life in man who can reason with self-consciousness. Hegel calls this self consciousness – mind or spirit. The basic triad of this part are subjective spirit (thesis), which refer to the inner working of the human mind and the objective spirit which represents the mind in its external embodiment in the social and political institutions become the anti-thesis and at the apex of knowledge stands the absolute as its synthesis.

The objective spirit is explained by Hegel with reference to the social consciousness or the society in general. This concept of right has three implications – Right to property (Thesis), Right to contract (Anti-Thesis) and Right to punish (Synthesis) respectively. To unite the above thesis and anti-thesis, a higher level of concept called, right to punish arrives as a synthesis. If, claiming certain rights from the society called the concept of right becomes the thesis, then discharging certain duties to the society with duty consciousness called the *concept of morality* becomes the anti-thesis. The unity of reality finds richest expression at the man-society level. Our consciousness of the absolute, says Hegel is achieved progressively as the mind moves from art to philosophy through religion. In the object of art, mind apprehends the absolute as beauty. Since no sensuous form can convey adequately the profound spiritual truth, the dialectic passes from art to its anti-thesis in religion. Religion occupies an intermediate position between art and philosophy. Ultimately, in philosophy, according to Hegel – the thinker is the Absolute, the subject matter of thinking is the Absolute and the medium through which the absolute thinks is also the absolute. Thus Hegel places philosophy as the highest point of development of human knowledge. The history of philosophy is for him, the development of the absolute self consciousness in the mind of man. The philosophical mind discovers the absolute in all stages of the dialectic and in so doing man becomes rational.

4.6 HEGEL'S CONTRIBUTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Hegel was convinced that the philosophy of Kant did not represent the final word in philosophical matters, because it was not possible to conceive a unified theory of reality by means of Kantian principles alone. For Hegel a unified theory of reality is one which can systematically explain all forms of reality, starting from a single principle or a single subject. For Hegel, these forms of reality included not only solar systems, physical bodies and the various guises assumed by organic life, for example, plants, animals and human beings, but also psychic phenomena, social and political forms of organization as well as artistic creations and cultural achievements such as religion and philosophy.

For Hegel, the fundamental principle which explains all reality is reason. Reason is not some quality which is attributed to some human subject; it is, by contrast, the sum of all reality. In accordance with this belief, Hegel claims that reason and reality are strictly identical: only reason is real and only reality is reasonable. Since reason is the whole of reality, this goal will be achieved when reason recognizes itself as total reality. It is the task of philosophy to give a coherent account of this process which leads to self-knowledge of reason. Hegel conceived this process by analogy with the model of organic development which takes place on various levels. Hegel thought of a living organism as an entity which represents the successful realization of a plan in which all individual characteristics of this entity are contained. In accordance with these assumptions, Hegel distinguished the concept of reason from the process of the realization of this concept. He undertook the exposition of the concept of reason in that section of his philosophical system which he calls the *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Science of Logic). In this first part of his system, the various elements of the concept of reason are discussed and placed into a systematic context. He presented the process of the realization of this concept in the other two parts of his system, the *Philosophie der Natur* (Philosophy of Nature) and the *Philosophie des Geistes* (Philosophy of Spirit). In the Philosophy of Nature, Hegel aims to describe comprehensively all aspects of natural phenomena as a system of increasingly complex facts. The Philosophy of Spirit treats of various psychological, social and cultural forms of reality. For Hegel, examples of such facts are the state, art, religion and history.

Hegel gave the world a more plausible and comprehensive system of idealism. His sole concern was to understand the world as it is and to explain everything logically. He explains adequately, the rational constitution of the universe. Even God as has been remarked, does not seem to be permitted any secrets which Hegel's reason is unable to disclose. Like Berkeley, though Hegel is an idealist, his idealism differs very much from Berkeley. Berkeley being an empirical theistic idealist believes that, God created this world and has His own existence, independent of His creation. While, Hegel being a rationalistic pantheistic idealist opines that Absolute is the world in its organic unity and not the creator of it. For Hegel, world is real although its various parts are dependent upon the unity of the whole. The whole is not a blank, unknowable unity, but it is rational and knowable in its organic interrelatedness.

4.7 LET US SUM UP

Hegel points out that the Absolute first manifests itself in the categories of logic and then externalised in the physical nature, subjective mind and objective mind.

Final culmination is reached in the absolute mind in which the whole reality is apprehended in its organic unity and completeness. In art, this is done through the medium of sensuous form, in religion through worship and in philosophy the absolute is disclosed in the conception of pure thought. Hegel criticises the traditional epistemological distinction of the objective from the subjective and offers his own dialectical account of the development of consciousness from individual sensation through social concern with ethics and politics to the pure consciousness, the spirit. The result is a comprehensive worldview that encompasses the historical development of civilization in all its sources.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Give an account of Hegel’ dialectic method.

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2) How do you estimate Hegel’s contribution to philosophy?

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4.8 KEY WORDS

Absolute : free from imperfection free or relatively free from mixture; being, governed by, or characteristic of a ruler or authority completely free from constitutional or other restraint (absolute power).

Absolute Mind : Absolute mind is the state in which mind rises above all the limitations of nature and institutions, and is subjected to itself alone in art, religion, and philosophy. For the essence of mind is freedom, and its development must consist in breaking away from the restrictions imposed on it by nature and human institutions.

4.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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