
II. G. W. F. HEGAL

(1770—1831)

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1. Life and Works :

Hegel was born in Stuttgart, in the Duchy Wurttemberg, in the year 1770. Though it is common to connect Hegel with Prussia, as he gave Prussian Constitution an exaggerated philosophical endorsement; it is important, however to remember that he was a Swabian, a south German.

Hegel claimed descent from one of the many refugees protestant families which had fled from Austria to Wurttemberg during the persecutions of the Counter Reformation.

Hegel had his schooling at Stuttgart Gymnasium where he consolidated his possession of contemporary learning and enlightenment by an elaborate system of notes and extracts. He learnt Greek thoughts : "Of all great modern philosophers, Hegel is the most thoroughly soaked and steeped in things Greek".¹

In 1788, at the age of 18, Hegel left the Stuttgart Gymnasium for the Theological Institute at Tubingen University, where he stayed as a student for five years.

Here he made friends like Holderlin, a poet in Greek, and Schelling, a philosopher who worked on his Absolute Idealism before the age of twenty six.

Here he revolted against this religious learning—he believed that the "theology was concerned with understanding and not reason".

French Revolution broke out when he was here and he says in his, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, that "Universal freedom . . . it is merely the revenge and fury of destruction".²

According to Hegel true freedom can be found in the laws and usages of some concrete community, in which the individual can find himself.

He got two tutorials between 1793 to 1800 and in them he developed his thoughts. At the beginning of 1801 Hegel was

left with a legacy and was delivered from the need of tutoring. He joined Schelling at Jena where he worked free from financial worries. He wrote two distinguished works :

- (1) The Phenomenology of Spirit, 1807
- (2) The Science of Logic, 1816.

He returned to the University, and held a chair of Philosophy at Heidelberg from 1816 to 1818 and one at Berlin from 1818 upto his death in 1831.

In 1816 he published his Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Science. In 1820 he published his, Outlines of the Philosophy of Right. His most famous lectures on the Philosophy of History were published after his death. He died in 1831.

2. Reason rules the World :-

Hegel looked upon his philosophy of history as *eschatological* design, or as philosophy. In fact, he proposed to treat history philosophically. Philosophy is nothing but thinking or reflecting on history. He calls the man as a thinking animal.

In his view, reason rules the world. He calls this as the only approach to the study of history. Reason is all powerful; and it feeds upon itself the material which it works upon.

Things happen in the world according to reason. The history is the rational and necessary way of the world spirit; spirit is the substance of history; the nature of the spirit is one and always the same and it explicates its one nature in the world's existence.

Hegel pondered over the theory which claimed that Providence rules the world. Divine power is said to be wisdom based on infinite power which realizes its ends.

Hegel said that it could not be accepted that providence is the basis of all world history. He argued that people put forward the view that the individuals are the cause of different

states and events. But he concludes his work on the Philosophy of History which tilted more in favour of the stand taken by Christian Theologists: "World history, with all this changing drama of its histories, is this process of development and realization of the spirit. It is the true theodicy, the justification of God in history. Only this insight can reconcile the spirit with world history and the actual reality, that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not "without God", but is essentially the work of God".³

The fact remains that the reason is the heart of the matter; others are only mere words.

Thus Hegel's conclusion is right that there is no history except the history of human life, and that, not merely as life, but as rational life, the life of thinking being.⁴

3. The Idea of History and its Realization:—

Our object, world history, occurs in the field of the spirit. The world comprises both physical and psychic nature. The physical nature affects world history... but the spirit and the course of its development is its substance... The first thing, therefore, which we must do is abstractly to determine the spirit. (The spirit is not abstracted from human nature but individual, but also its object. It is the nature of the spirit to have itself as its object).⁵

The orientals do not know that the spirit is free in itself, or that man is free in himself. Because they do not know it, they are not free.

The consciousness of freedom arose among the Greeks, and therefore they were free; but they, like the Romans knew only that a few are free, and not man as such. Therefore the Greeks kept slaves and their lives and beautiful freedom was tied to their masters.

Only the Germanic nations have in the end, through ethnic groups of Northern European origin e.g. northern Scandinavia & Germany.

*qua means in the capacity of
capacity of man as rational being*

Christianity, achieved consciousness that man qua man is free and that freedom of the spirit constitutes his very nature: "The Germanic spirit is the spirit of the new world. Its end is the realization of absolute truth as the unlimited self-determination of freedom, that freedom which has its own absolute form as its content. The destiny of the Germanic peoples is to be the bearers of the Christian principles. The principle of spiritual freedom, of reconciliation and harmony (of the objective and subjective), was introduced into the still simple, informed minds of the peoples. The part assigned to them in the service of the world spirit was that of not merely possessing the idea of freedom as the substratum of their religious conceptions, but of producing it in free and spontaneous developments from their subjective self consciousness".⁶

The consciousness arose first in religion in the inner most region of the spirit. But to extend this principle to the secular realm was a further task, the solution and execution of which required a difficult and long labour, a civilizing process... World history is the progress which we must know and understand in its (inherent) necessity.

The spirit has distinction—it constitutes the final end of the world. It is the consciousness of its freedom and thus the actualization—freedom is the highest good.

What means does freedom employ? "This question of means leads into history and its phenomena. If freedom as such is the internal conception, the means are something external—the phenomena which present themselves in history as it occurs before our eyes."

First of all, we note that what we have called principle, final end, distinction, or what we have called the spirit in itself, its nature, its conception, is merely something general and abstract. A principle, a maxim or law is something general and inward which as such, be it ever so true, is not fully actually

real. Purposes, principles and the like are in our thoughts only in our inward intention or in book; they are not yet in actual reality. What is by itself, is only a possibility, a potentiality, but it has not yet emerged into full existence. A second element must be added to make it actually real, which its activation, or actualization, and the principle of this is the will and the activity of men in the world. Only by this activity are those conceptions and determinations (destinations ?) realized and actualized.⁸

4. Hegelian Dialectic :—

Since all history is the history of thought and exhibits the self-development of reason, the historical process is at bottom a logical process. Historical transitions are, so to speak, logical transitions set out on a time-scale. History is nothing but a kind of logic where the relation of logical priority and posteriority is not so much replaced as enriched or consolidated by becoming a relation of temporal priority and posteriority. Hence the developments that take place in history are never accidental, they are necessary; and our knowledge of our historical process is not merely empirical, it is *a priori*, we can see the necessity of it".⁹

- (1) Hegel believed that history is not pure *a priori* but it contains *a priori* elements.
- (2) History consisted of empirical events which were the outward expression of thoughts.
- (3) Thoughts behind the expression (and the events themselves) formed a claim of logically connected concepts.

Hegel in fact is saying that Historian must work by studying documents and other evidence; it is only in this way that he can establish what the facts are. But he must then look at the facts from inside, and tell us what they look like from that point of view.

His theory of dialectic comes in here. He says that any concept generates its opposite, overcomes it, so that the way in which the concept lives is by creating and overcoming oppositions.

Hegel's whole philosophy turns on the principle that every historical process is a dialectical process in which one form of life, for example Greece, generates its own opposites, in this case Rome, and out of this thesis and antithesis there arises a synthesis, in this case the Christian world.¹⁰

Croce did not like to call the concepts opposite but different. Hence he would not like the use of these dialectical terms.

Collingwood holds that when talking of event we could afford to abandon the dialectical terms, but not when we are discussing the ideas behind them. And this is what Hegel meant.

5. Private Interest and General Interest :—

Hegel says that altogether nothing has ever come into being without the interest of those whose activity was involved. We may further call an interest a passion.

And Hegel says that a state will be well-organized and strong in itself if its general end is joined to the private interests of its citizens, the one is satisfied and realized through the other—a very important proposition in itself.¹¹

6. Individuals' Role in History :—

The world history begins with general end, namely to satisfy the desire of the spirit to conceive itself. The infinite mass of wills, intents and activities are the tools of world spirit to accomplish its end, . . . to come to itself and to contemplate itself as actual reality.

Hegel gives the examples of Caesar who conquered his enemies. But this also led to a greater Roman Empire. "Such

are the great men in history whose own particular purposes contain the substantial task which is the will of the world spirit".¹²

If we cast a glance at the destiny of these world historical individuals, they have had the good luck to be the executioners of "a purpose which forms a stage in the forward march of the general spirit".¹³

"He seems to personify reason into something outside human life, which brings about through the agency of blind and passionate men purposes which are its purposes and not theirs".¹⁴

He believes that considering this destiny, religious and ethical decline, corruption and loss occurs because of the guilt of the individuals (in history). "Only an animal is truly and completely innocent."

The forces like religion, passion and ethical are limited and subject to decline. But the inward spirit remains untouched by the loud voice of world history.

Hegel's view of history is rational view, but curiously enough he conceives, irrational elements as essential to reason itself.¹⁵

7. Does History Repeat Itself?

Hegel distinguishes spirit from nature.. Nature is not self-conscious while the spirit is. Again, nature is repetitive as the sun follows a set route everyday. But the spirit is not cyclic, it is progress. And the progress is for something better.

History, or the course of spirit, does not travel in the circles, but in spirals. Apparent repetitions are always differentiated by having acquired something new.

Thus war appears from time to time in history, but every new war is in some ways a new kind of war, owing to the

lessons learnt by human beings in the last one.¹⁶

8. Hegal's Place as an Historiographer :—

Engels, who had co-operated and shared reputation with Marx, said that his "Philosophy is not disposed of by the mere assertion that it is false. And so powerful a work as Hegelian philosophy—which had exercised so enormous an influence on the intellectual development of the nation—could not be disposed of by simply being ignored. It had to be "sublated" in its own sense, that is, in the sense that while its form had to be annihilated through criticism, the new content which had been won through it had to be saved".¹⁸

George Santay, an American philosopher, depicts Hegal as an advocate of absolutism of the state : "The die is cast, the war against human nature and happiness is declared, and an idol that feeds on blood, the Absolute State, is set up in the heart and over the city."¹⁹

Carl J. Friedrich says that "much of the western philosophy is Hegelian".²⁰ Patrick Gardiner wrote : "Since his death Hegal has been the object both of extravagant eulogy and of bitter denunciation and attack. It is, however, impossible to deny the range and depth of his influence on the development of nineteenth-century thought—both in philosophy and in social and political theory".²¹

Collingwood said of Hegal : "He proposes a new kind of history, to be called the philosophy of history (the proposal and the terminology being as old as Voltaire); but the philosophy of history is for him not a philosophical reflection on history, but history itself raised to a higher power and became philosophical as distinct from merely empirical, that is, history not merely ascertained as so much fact but understood by apprehending the reasons why the facts happened as they did. This philosophical history will be a universal history of mankind (here Hegal

follows Herder) and will exhibit a progress from primitive times to the civilization of today. The plot of this story is the development of freedom, which is identical with the moral reason of man as exhibited in an external system of social relations, so that the question which philosophical history has to answer is the question how the state came into existence (all this is taken from Kant). But the historian knows nothing of the future; history culminates not in a future Utopia but in the actual present (this is Schiller). Man's freedom is the same thing as his consciousness of his freedom, so the development of freedom is a development of consciousness, a process of thought or logical development, in which the various necessary phases or moment of the concept are successively achieved (this is Fichte). Lastly, philosophical history exhibits no merely human process but a cosmic process, a process in which the world comes to realize itself in self-consciousness as spirit (this is Schelling). Thus every one of the characteristic features of Hegel's philosophy of history is drawn by him from his predecessors, but he has combined their views with extraordinary skill into a theory so coherent and so unified that it deserves independent consideration as a whole, and I propose, therefore, to draw attention to some of its distinctive features."²²

And he goes on: "Of his more immediate disciples, Baur specialized in the history of Christian doctrine, and Marx in the history of economic activity, while Ranke was later to apply systematically his conception of historical movements or periods as the realization of a conception or idea such as Protestantism."²³

"He conceived his own philosophy as the inheritor of past philosophies worthy of the name, and took pains to display them as stages of a development culminating in his own idealism."²⁴

State according to Hegel acquires a central place. He calls

the state real and true reality is necessity. "What is real is externally necessary . . . The state exists for its own sake."

Popper calls him the employee of Frederick William IV of Prussia to defend his employer. His was statephilosophy. He defended monarchical constitution and the state as centre of all activities. Prussia touched the pinnacle of glory and it was the stronghold of freedom.²⁵

According to Popper, it was the spell of Hegal's influence that Germany got united under Bismarck; and in the twentieth century, the same spirit was swaying the German history.

Hegal very naturally studied other philosophers who went before him. But it is a credit to him that he presented a theory which makes him out as an original thinker in the field of politics and history. Hegal did not write in vacuum is quite obvious, but also he did not leave a vacuum behind. Therefore we could say that Hegal because of his contribution would be always remembered as a great historiographer in his own right.

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By

Dr. Muhammad Aslam Qureshi

M A (History), M A. (Pol Sc) Pb (Gold Medalist)
D. Phil (Oxon)

PUNJAB UNIVERSITY LAHORE

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