

Hegel's Philosophy of History: Dialectical Process in the Realm of Ideas

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (b. 1770-d. 1831), a German intellectual, was the most influential philosopher of Romantic Movement. He studied theology, logic and philosophy, and later taught at the Universities of Jena, Nuremberg, Heidelberg, and finally occupied the chair of philosophy at the University of Berlin after the death of Fichte. His important works include (i) *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), (ii) *Science of Logic* (1812-16), (iii) *The Philosophy of History* (1816), (iv) *The Philosophy of Right and Law* (1821), and (v) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion and Lectures on Aesthetics* (1838, a posthumous work). Hegel was influenced by the ideas of great thinkers like Voltaire, Herder, Kant, Friedrich Schiller (a German poet, philosopher and historian; d. 1805), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (a German philosopher, and one of the founders of the philosophical movement known as German idealism; d. 1814), and Friedrich Schelling (a German philosopher who made important contributions to German idealism d. 1854). However, Hegel's ingenuity and originality lies in the fact that he combined their views with extraordinary skill into a coherent and unified theory.

Hegel is a speculative philosopher of history, who offered a philosophical interpretation of the past based on speculation and guesswork. As an idealist philosopher, Hegel asserts the primacy of ideas rather than matter. To him, ideas are more important than human actions or events. Moreover, an idea is prerequisite for an action. For instance, an architect first conceives an idea in his mind, and then a building (which is the material manifestation of his idea) is constructed. It is the idea or thought which comes first, and then its materialization takes place in the form of an event or human action, which is the concrete manifestation of the idea. Hegel interprets all history as the history of thought or ideas, not of events or actions or human beings. According to him, all historical events and human actions are the concrete manifestation or outward expression of human thought, and the primary subject-matter of history is the ideas, and not events. Therefore, his view or interpretation of history is considered to be idealistic.

Hegel believes that there is a hidden meaning and an underlying pattern in history, which he calls an idea or 'Absolute idea', also referred to as 'Absolute Reason' and 'Absolute Infinite Spirit in the Works OF Hegel. The Absolute Idea is meaningful, purposeful and intelligible i.e. it can be understood by human beings. Its author is God, which he calls the World Spirit'. The Absolute idea is reason, which is, in fact, divine reason (reason

of God), and therefore, he often uses the term 'Absolute Reason' for it. The Absolute idea or Absolute Reason cannot be fully revealed to human beings until it has reached a-certain point in time, when it will become self-evident. This will be the final stage of human history. According to Hegel, the universe was also first conceived as an idea, and was later created out of nothing. Initially, the Absolute Idea wanted its self-realization or self-actualization by being gradually revealed to the world, therefore, concretized itself in the form of universe, which is the concrete material manifestation of the idea.

The process of unfolding of the Absolute Idea is gradual and progressive, since it reveals itself only in bits and parts. Finally, at the end of time it will be completely revealed to the human beings. Thus, the whole human history is the history of the unfolding of the 'Absolute Idea. In other words, history exhibits a self-development of reason. The human history is the journey of reason, that how reason revealed itself to, the human beings, and how people realized the divine reason and became conscious of it. Hegel maintains that the world is moving towards its destiny, which is predetermined by God, and the destiny is the fulfillment and complete revelation of the absolute idea to humanity thus; the whole human history is the history of the unfolding of the absolute idea. That is why; the

philosophy of Hegel is generally believed to have deterministic element in it.

According to Hegel, it is gradual movement of time which reveals the Absolute idea, and the movement of time is unchangeable and inexorable, which cannot be delayed. It is controlled by God, and human beings have no control over it. In this way, Hegel tries to counter the idea of progress and human perfectibility, which argues that human beings have become the master of their own destiny, propounded by the rationalist philosophers of the Enlightenment era.

To Hegel, the single formula or the unitary precept that explains all human history is the principle of dialectics, a pattern that appeared recurrent to him throughout history. The force behind the movement of history, which unfolds the Absolute idea, is the force of dialectic. Dialectic may be defined as a struggle between two opposite forces, i.e. the idea and its counter idea. It is philosophically argued that things are known because of their opposites. We perceive night because of the day, and happiness is understood because of sadness or pain. Dialectic is also defined as the law of strife, interpenetration, and unity of opposites, or the law of the negation of negation. Dialectic includes the methods of analysis (breaking down a whole in small parts) and synthesis (blend of two, or reconciliation of two). In the process of synthesis, the valid elements of both the idea (thesis) and

counter-idea (anti-thesis) are retained, whereas the invalid elements are discarded.

According to Hegel, the whole human history reveals a pattern, which is as follows: thesis- antithesis-synthesis. The thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle takes place in the realm of ideas. In other words, first an idea (or a thesis) is developed, and then its counter-idea (or an anti-thesis) is emerged. However, both the idea/thesis and the counter-idea/anti-thesis are later synthesized to give birth- to a new 1dea, which again becomes a thesis, and its anti-thesis is developed and both are later synthesized. In this way, the thesis-antithesis-synthesis cycle repeats itself, but not in the same manner. Every repetition is an improvement over the previous cycle. He maintains that no truth 1s ever lost, since all past truth and knowledge is contained in a thesis. Thus. Hegel believes in the cyclical-spiral movement of time and history.

Hegel argues that it is this dialectical process through which the Absolute Idea or Absolute Reason is gradually developed and revealed to the human beings. However, the process will finally come to an end after the complete unfolding of the Absolute idea or Absolute Reason at the end of time. He also asserts that at a given time in history, he Absolute idea s represented by an idea or a thesis such as Catholicism or capitalism.

In history, the gradual progress of the Absolute idea is carried by the states, since state is the battle-field of the conflict between ideas. According to Hegel, the time of war and revolution is the time when the dialectical process is going on. To Hegel, state is the 'march of God on earth. The critics of Hegel argue that he glorified the state, especially his contemporary Prussian monarchy. Some even assert that the Hegelian ideas ultimately led to the emergence of the Nazi State under Adolf Hitler (r. 1933-1945) in Germany.

Hegel tries to counter the rationalism of the Enlightenment thinkers. However, in doing so, he does not altogether reject it, but devises a new form of rationalism. As pointed out above, the Enlightenment historians had generally viewed past as a history of irrationality, since all human actions or the past appeared to them to be irrational acts. Since Hegel tries to interpret all human past as the gradual development of reason, it is difficult for him to interpret certain phenomena such, as oppression and injustices of the past as irrational acts. Therefore, Hegel interprets such acts within the rational framework, and calls them the 'cunning of reason. The critics of Hegelian thought argue that Hegel over-emphasized the role of reason or the Absolute idea, and ignored the role of human agency in history.

Hegel is also influenced by the Hebrew-Christian historical thought. He borrows its fundamental characteristics such as universalism, periodization, and the concepts of apocalypse and the role of providence, but transforms and redefines them in secular meanings. Hegel's philosophy of history is universal, as it starts from the creation of universe by the Absolute idea, and comes to an end with the complete unfolding of the idea. For periodizing history, Hegel uses the biological analogy for various stages of human history. The ancient India and China represent the childhood of the development of the Spirit, reason and consciousness. The Greek times represent the adolescence of the Spirit, whereas the Roman times represent the maturity and manhood of the Spirit. In the final stage of human history, his contemporary Prussia represents the old age of the Spirit. Hegel is influenced by the apocalyptic idea of Christianity. Though Hegel is discontented with the idea of predicting the future, and insists that history culminates in the present rather than in a 'future Utopia', his concept of the Absolute idea has a sense of conclusiveness.

The critics of Hegelian thought have pointed out that Hegel glorified his present time, and viewed it as the end of history, since for him, history ends with the present day. As a philosopher, he is not concerned with future, and argues that it is not the task of a historian to predict future.

The place of God and the role of providence in Hegelian thought are quite central. Some of Hegel's works are considered to be theological and metaphysical in nature, since he seems to have replaced the notion of God with the concept of "Absolute Idea" (also referred to as 'Absolute Reason', 'Logical idea and Absolute Spirit') in his philosophical. Interpretation of history. For him, history is a "Theodicaea", or a theodicy, and a "justification of the ways of God". In fact, for him, God is history. He even writes that God governs the world: the contents of His government, the execution of His plan, is World History"" According to Peter Manicas, for Hegel, "Providence works by means of the unintended- consequences of our acts. Historical change goes on "behind the backs of persons". The concept of God in Hegel is abstract Though Hegelian approach apparently seems to be Theo-centric, he has in fact tried to synthesize the Theo-centric and anthro-po-centric approaches. In his works he often uses theological terminology but with metaphysical and secular connotations.

Hegel divides history in three categories: (i) Original History or Empirical history, which is based on facts and figures; (ii) Reflective History, which is deduced or inferred from facts and figures, and (iii) Philosophical History which philosophizes the entire past.

Hegel's theory or philosophy for interpreting the human history is more abstract than most of the philosophers of history. It has tremendous

significance in terms of application. Hegel gave primacy to the ideas and human thought, rather than actions. The development of human thought through the ages can usefully be explained and understood by employing his theory. For instance, Judaism, with its rigid legality for outward regulation of human actions, can be taken as a thesis, and Christianity that emerged as its reaction can be taken as its anti-thesis, since the latter has a heightened emphasis on other-worldliness and spirituality for inward regulation of human actions. Islam, however, can be taken as a synthesis of Judaism and Christianity, since it amalgamated the legality and spirituality in a balanced way by discarding the excesses of both." Similarly, if we take capitalism and liberal democracy as a thesis, its anti-thesis is Socialism/communism, and the synthesis is social democracy or the concept of welfare state. In the same manner, the concepts of territorial nationalism (thesis), Pan-Islamism (anti-thesis) and Muslim nationalism (synthesis) is another example in point.

Hegel tried to counter the rationalist thinkers, but his response to their excessive rationalism was within the same rationalist paradigm. There is no paradigmatic shift in his thought, since he has reinterpreted reason. While doing so, he personified reason, and portrayed it as having an independent existence of its own, and external to human beings. He tried to

synthesize, the, ideas of rationalists and romanticists. by arguing that human beings are endowed with both reason and passions.

Furthermore, the Hegelian theory implies that the ideas or the ideological factors are the most important agents, which bring about change in history. Though not all but many historical phenomena and changes in history can be attributed the ideological causes. According to Hegel, changes occur first in the realm of ideas, and lead to changes in material physical world. However, the critics of Hegelian thought assert that changes taking place in the material conditions may also lead to tremendous changes in human ideas.

Merits of Romanticist Historiography

What follows is a brief discussion on the merits of the impact of Romanticism on historiography: The Romanticist historians humanized history by countering the over-emphasis on the power of reason by the Enlightenment thinkers, and by highlighting the role of the human desires, passions and feelings in human history.

The Romanticist historians stressed the need that the human past needed a sympathetic investigation, and that the historians must respect the past, and try to search the human achievements in every age of the past. They

argued that every stage of human history had his own achievements owing to the development of human mind and thought.

The Romanticist historians indirectly challenged the Euro-centric focus of history-Writing by broadening its scope and writing about the cultures, societies and civilizations other than European such as the Chinese, India, Persian, Arabic and Egyptian.

The Romanticist historians such as Herder argued that the past ideas, traditions and institutions were right in their own historical context, and must not be seen and interpreted in the light of the norms and values of the present times.

Demerits of Romanticist Historiography

What follows is a brief discussion on, the demerits of the impact of Romanticism on historiography:

Since the Romanticists had highlighted the role of imagination and fantasies in human life, the historians inspired by the Romantic Movement Wrote histories that were more fanciful and imaginary than based on rigorous historical research. Historical imagination was employed-more than scientific research methods-for history-Writing.

The Romanticists had romanticized the human past by making it appear more exciting than actual. The Romanticist historians resurrected the

notion of the golden past, and their views about the human past eventually led to its over-glorification.

The Romanticism Movement generated theories of race and culture, which eventually -gave birth to the theories of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism. The proponents of the theory of nationalism sometimes distorted the past in order to create a false sense of national pride, whereas imperialism led to the colonization of the non-White races in Asia and Africa.