

---

## UNIT 14 GEORGE WILHELM FRIEDRICH HEGEL

---

### Structure

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Life and Times
- 14.3 Spiritual Ancestry
  - 14.3.1 Influence of Historical Events
- 14.4 Idealism
  - 14.4.1 Dialectical Method
  - 14.4.2 Use of Dialectical Method
- 14.5 Philosophy of History
- 14.6 Theory of State
- 14.7 Theory of Freedom of the Individual
- 14.8 Conclusion
- 14.9 Summary
- 14.10 Exercises

---

### 14.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Hegel was a product of German Idealism, which drew considerable inspiration from Rousseau and Kant and integrated it with contemporary popular desire for German unification leading to the rise of the nation states in Europe. Hegel like Fichte echoed the sentiment of idealism.

His assertion that the real will of the individual is not in negation but an affirmation with society meant that the rational will of the individual was expressed in the totality of the will of the state. The consciousness and moral authority of the state subordinated the individual will. By the dialectical logic of a spirit, the march of history moves from the imperfect to the perfect stage rationally removing all the obstacles of acquiring the distinction between 'is' and 'ought' as real became rational. Though the state is the most important institution of this present ideal, the other two important components were civil society and the family. Freedom played an important role in Hegel but Hegelian version of freedom was associated with rationality unlike the thrust of British liberalism, which associated freedom with liberty and individuality.

---

### 14.2 LIFE AND TIMES

---

Born in 1770 in the princely state of Wurtemberg (Southern Germany), Hegel studied theology because his father wanted him to become a clergyman. In 1793 he got the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) from the University of Tubingen. Thereafter he became a tutor at Bern and Frankfurt and worked as such for about seven years. In 1801 he got a job as lecturer at the University of Jena and later became a Professor. In 1816 he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg and in 1818 he became *Professor of Philosophy* at the Berlin University. This position was held till then by the renowned German philosopher Fichte. Along with this assignment Hegel also worked the official advisor of Emperor of Prussia (Germany). He held these two positions till his death in 1830.

Hegel wrote extensively on various aspects of Political Philosophy. It was at Jena that he wrote his first major work *Phenomenology of Mind*, which was published in 1807. This was followed by publication of *Science of Logic* in 1811-12. After the publication of this work Hegel earned the recognition as an outstanding philosopher of Germany. His third work, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, which he wrote during his stay at Heidelberg, made him famous all over Europe. It was at Berlin that he wrote his major work in political theory, *Philosophy of Right*. He also delivered very scholarly and brilliant lectures, which were published by his son after his death under the title, *Philosophy of History*. His writings and lectures and his many positions as Advisor of the emperor earned him international fame and won him many followers. He became not only the King of philosophers but also the philosopher of kings.

---

## 14.3 SPIRITUAL ANCESTRY

---

Hegel's writings show that several philosophers and thinkers of the past immensely influenced him. Hegel borrowed his dialectical method from Socrates. So the ancestry of Hegelian doctrine of dialectical idealism can be traced back to these two great Greek thinkers of the past. One can also discern some influence of Aristotle's teleology on Hegel. Teleology is a theory of knowledge according to which a thing is understood in terms of its end or purpose. For example, the end or purpose of a watch is to tell time. So telling time is the true nature or the true end or purpose of watch. The great German rationalist Immanuel Kant's influence is also discernible in Hegel's writings. The Hegelian idea that the state is founded on reason and the laws made by the state are the dictates of pure reason is quite similar to the Kantian position. Like Kant, Hegel did not give to the individuals the right to resist or oppose the state or the laws made by it. There are even traces of Rousseau's influence on Hegel. Like Rousseau's General Will, the Hegelian Idea, Spirit or Reason is infallible. Again like Rousseau, Hegel gives primacy to public interest over the private interest. You would recall that Rousseau had drawn a distinction between the actual will and the real will. To put it in Hegelian terms, Rousseau's actual will is that which promotes the self-interest of the individual while the real will is that which promotes the public interest. Because the general will is the condensation or the sum total of all the real wills (based on reason) it is infallible.

Hegel's philosophy was historicist in nature. Historicism is a doctrine, which is variously understood by different thinkers. In its most general sense it is rooted in the assumption that there are limits to scientific knowledge about human activities and achievements and such inadequate scientific knowledge cannot be used as a means for controlling the future course of events. Contrary to this, historicism is linked to ambitions for subjecting all human happenings to rational control.

### 14.3.1 Influence of Historical Events

In the previous part some of the major influences on Hegel have been spelled out; but Hegel was not influenced only by the great thinkers of past. Some major contemporary events also influenced him. Two events which exercised considerable influence on Hegel were the French Revolution (1789) and the subjugation of Germany by Napoleon in the beginning of the 19th Century. French Revolution overthrew the old oppressive feudal order and projected the vision of a new society wedded to the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The values of liberty and fraternity particularly influenced his writings. The subjugation of the German state by Napoleon disillusioned him and he set out to resolve the perennial political problems of the states. The reconciliation that he advocated in his writings is unique and paradoxical in many respects.

Before we take up an analysis of Hegel's political philosophy it is necessary for us to bear in mind that although he borrowed many of his ideas from Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Kant and Rousseau, he used them to evolve his own philosophy. He assimilated their ideas in his logical system. In other words, the Hegelian political philosophy stands apart from each of them.

---

## 14.4 IDEALISM

---

In the history of political ideas there are two major schools of thought about the nature of reality—idealism and naturally, rationalism and empiricism. The question about that nature of reality is ontological; while the question about knowing it is epistemological according to the Idealist school, of which Hegel is a major proponent, (the other one being Plato), true knowledge of every thing in the world—material and non material—is deduced from idea of the thing. In other words, the idea of the thing, is more important than the thing itself. Therefore, what is real and permanent is the “idea of a thing” not the thing as such. This is so because the physical world is constantly in a state of flux and change but the idea is permanent. The physical world is only a manifestation of the idea. For example, the true knowledge of table or chair lies in comprehending the idea of table or chair. An actually existing table is a table in so far as it has the characteristics of table-hood. A carpenter is able to make a table because he has the idea of table in his mind and the table that he makes is only a manifestation or approximation of that idea. The terms hot and cold are understood as idea. The knowledge of actually existing things is relative and hence imperfect. When you say that water in this glass is hot it is only a relative truth because as compared to boiling water it is cold but as compared to water in the refrigerator it is hot. So the real knowledge is to comprehend the idea of hot and cold.

Hegelian idealism is often referred to as Absolute Idealism because it provides us with a set of categories (hot and cold, pleasure and pain) in terms of which all human experiences of the past and the present can be understood. There is another dimension of Hegelian idealism. This may be called Idealist Interpretation of History. According to this theory it is the ideas that constitute the true motor of history. What gives momentum to history is the development of ideas. All changes in society, economy, polity and culture take place because of development of ideas. Hegel's Idealism which is often called Absolute Idealism sees a certain relationship between the subject and the object. It is a relationship between the subject and the object. It is a relationship between a knowing subject and the objective world, which is known, i.e. relationship between the mind and the world.

### 14.4.1 Dialectical Method

Hegel's political philosophies rest mainly on his dialectical method. As already pointed out Hegel borrowed his method from Socrates who is the first exponent of this method. Hegel has himself expressed his debt to Socrates for this method. The dialectic means to discuss. Socrates believed that one can arrive at the truth only by constant questioning. It was the process of exposing contradictions through the method of discussion. Having taken a clue from Socrates Hegel argued that absolute Idea or the Spirit, in search of self-realisation moves from Being to non-being to becoming. To put it in simple words, an idea moves from a thesis to antithesis until a synthesis of the two is found. Synthesis has in it elements of thesis as well as antithesis. In due course the synthesis itself acquires the status of a thesis and gives rise to its own antithesis. This process goes on. In practice, Hegel applied his dialectical method to the domain of ideas. Therefore, his method may be described as dialectical idealism. It means that every idea (thesis) gives rise to a counter idea (antithesis) and the original idea and counter idea

(merge) to give rise to a new idea (synthesis). This new idea, in due course, itself becomes a thesis and gives rise to its antithesis and the process goes on. Hegel argued that through the use of his dialectical method he has discovered the greatest formula in the history of philosophy. He maintained that the march of reason in history was a complex dialectical process. It is a mechanism by which thought propels itself. Dialectical idealism was a logical apparatus for interpreting the history in its true perspective.

#### 14.4.2 Use of Dialectical Method

Having stated his dialectical method Hegel argued that a phenomenon can be best understood according to the law of dialectics, i.e. when contrasted with its opposite. Pleasure is best understood in opposition to pain, heat in opposition to cold, goodness in opposition to badness, justice in opposition to injustice and so on. Hegel has given several instances of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The following instances given by him are note worthy and you should remember them.

- i) Family is the thesis, civil society is its antithesis and state is the synthesis.
- ii) Similarly, despotism is thesis, democracy is its antithesis and constitutional monarchy is the synthesis.
- iii) Inorganic world is the thesis, organic world is its antithesis and human beings are the synthesis.

Hegel believed that the true nature of thing can be known only if its contradictions are also known. In this sense, his theory of dialects is rooted in contradiction or negation. He considered contradictions as the driving force of the whole process of evolution. This is the fundamental law of the cosmos as also of thought.

---

### 14.5 PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

---

Hegel's philosophy of history is contained in the lectures that he delivered while he was at the Berlin University. He does not attach much importance to the material things. He views them merely as the cumulative result of evolution of absolute Idea. Absolute Idea is dynamic and ever evolving. It moves forward in search of self-realisation. This is termed by Hegel as unfolding of *the reason*. The whole universe is the result of this process of unfolding of Reason. In fact, Hegel's philosophy of history is somewhat similar to the Christian theology, which sees history as a pattern of meaningful events which can be understood in terms of cosmic design. It is unfolding of reason under God's guidance or as willed by God. The Absolute Idea moves forward in an evolutionary process. In this evolutionary process the absolute Idea or the spirit takes many forms, discarding the earlier ones and getting newer ones. The first stage in this evolution is the physical or the inorganic world. At this initial stage the Absolute Idea (or Spirit) acquires the form of gross matter. The second stage in this process is the organic world: animals, plants etc. This stage is an improvement on the earlier stage. The third stage is the evolution of human beings. Each stage is more complicated than the previous stage. The evolution of human beings marks a qualitatively higher stage because the human beings are rational agents capable of distinguishing between good and bad. The fourth stage marks the evolution of family system, In addition to rational element it involves mutual cooperation and accommodation. The fifth stage marks the evolution of Civil Society. Here economic interdependence is the main feature in addition to mutual cooperation and accommodation. The last

and highest stage witnesses the evolution of the state, which represents a perfect moral order. Hegel argues that family symbolises unity; civil society symbolises particularity and the state symbolises universality. The unity of the family, particularity of the civil society is realised with the appearance of the state as the actuality of the universal order. Both the family and civil society are to some degree rational but only the state is perfectly rational and perfectly ethical. In short, the evolutionary process passes through the following stages and each successive stage is a distinct improvement on the predecessor stages:

Inorganic world - organic world - human beings - family - civil society - State

It should be noted that with the help of the above argument Hegel tried to solve the basic problem about the relationship between matter and Spirit. He did so by arguing that matter is only a manifestation of Spirit in its crude form. Matter is not only a negation of Spirit but also the conscious realisation of Spirit.

The second important dimension of Hegel's philosophy of history is the doctrine of historicism. It is difficult to explain this doctrine. Broadly speaking, historicism is a doctrine, which holds that the whole course of history is predetermined course. The human intervention or human effort can be effective only if it falls in line with the dialectical direction of the world history. Like the stoic God history leads the wise man and drags the fool.

The third major dimension of Hegel's philosophy of history is the use of Aristotelian teleology. According to it every thing in the world is moving towards the realisation of its end, its true nature. From the point of view of the human actors, history is a union of irony and tragedy; from the point of view of the Whole it is a cyclic. When we look at Hegel's philosophy of history in its totality we can say that it is an attempt to synthesise Kant's and Herder's philosophies of history. Kant advocated scientific understanding of history, while Herder emphasised the place of feelings and speculation. In this sense Hegel's philosophy of history is speculative reason. Let us elaborate this point.

- ✓ For fuller understanding of thrust of Hegel's philosophy of history you must understand that there is philosophical as against empirical history. The historians of latter category insist on accurate delineation of the facts which is their paramount concern. The former (philosophic historians) on the other hand are not satisfied with mere narration of facts and try to provide divination of the meaning and look for the exhibition of reason's working in the sphere of history. They do not feel satisfied by mere reproduction of empirical facts and try to incorporate their knowledge of the Idea, the articulation of reason. Thus they elevate empirical contents to the level of necessary truth.

For Hegel the world history exhibits the development of the consciousness of freedom on the part of Spirit. Hegel actually applies his philosophy of history when he says that in the oriental world (China etc) there was despotism and slavery and freedom was confined only to the monarch. But in Greek and Roman civilisations although slavery was there, yet the citizens enjoyed freedom. In Europe particularly in Germany there is emphasis on liberty for all and infinite worth of each individual is recognised. The world history thus consists of definite stages of progression—Oriental, Greek, Roman and Germanic. In short, Hegel's philosophy of history consists of two parts: (i) the general pattern and (ii) various stages in this general pattern. Finally, Hegel's philosophy of history talks of doctrine of moving forces in historical change. He argues that Reason's great design can be carried out with the help of human passions. Certain great men (like Caesar or Alexander) are chosen as instruments of destiny. Such men are necessary if the plot of history is to be carried out. This amounts to saying that ideas are important but there must be will power to implement them.

---

## 14.6 THEORY OF STATE

---

The most seminal contribution of Hegel to Political Philosophy is his theory of state. Like Plato, Hegel is a great system builder. His theory of state is rooted in the axiom: "What is rational is real and what is real is rational". It means that whatever exists in the world is according to Reason and whatever is according to reason exists. Hegel's theory of state is based on the basic premise about the gradual unfolding of Reason or Spirit or Absolute Idea through a dialectical process. Reason gets its perfect realisation in the state. Thus, the state is Reason personified. State is rational, state is real; therefore what is rational is real. Here, real does not only mean that which is empirical but that which is fundamental. In fact, Hegel distinguishes between real and that which merely exists. That which merely exists is only momentary and mere surface manifestation of underlying forces which alone are real. Thus, Hegel sought to bridge the gap between the rational and the real. The real is nothing but the objective manifestation of spirit.

This implies that for Hegel all states are rational in so far as they represent the various states of unfolding of Reason. By doing so he took a conservative position because it tantamounts to saying that whatever happens is manifestation of unfolding of Reason. No event ever occurs unless ordained by Reason. So every event takes place according to a rational plan. He considered the state as "March of God on Earth" or the ultimate embodiment of Reason.

State, for Hegel, is the highest manifestation of Reason because it emerges as a synthesis of family (thesis) and civil society (antithesis). Family fulfills man's biological needs—food, sex and love. It is the first manifestation of spirit but it cannot fulfill the higher or more complex needs for which we need a civil society. While the basic feature of family is unity based on love the civil society is necessary for the fulfillment of his competitive self-interest and for the satisfaction of diverse human needs, particularly the economic needs which the family cannot fulfill. The civil society is organised on the basis of individual's material needs, which are not wholly private and yet are primarily self-regarding. It is less selfish than the family. It is saved from disintegration because men begin to realise that their needs can be met only by recognising the claims of others. Civil society educates the individual where he begins to see that he can get what he needs only by willing what other individuals need. It is not a complete organic unity. Such unity is realised only when the tension involved in the contradiction between family and civil society is transcended in the final synthesis of the state. The civil society looks after the material needs of human beings and therefore, Hegel sees it as state in its embryonic form. The state looks after the universal interests of the whole community and it acquires an organic character.

By way of summing up this complex Hegelian theory of state we may say that first it has divine origin because the state is divinely ordained growth of absolute Idea or Reason. There can be no spiritual evolution beyond the state as there can be no physical evolution beyond man. It is the march of God on earth. Secondly, Hegel is statist because the state in his philosophy is not a means to an end but an end in itself. The state does not exist for the individuals but the individuals exist for the state. Thirdly, for Hegel the whole (state) is greater than the parts (individuals) that constitute it. Their (individuals') importance is only due to the fact that they are members of the state. Thus, Hegel makes the individuals totally subordinate to the state. Only the state knows what is in individual's interest. State in that sense is infallible. It is also infallible because it is divine. Hegel argued that, "all the worth which the human being possesses—all spiritual reality—he possesses only through the State. For his spiritual reality consists in this, that his own essence—Reason—is objectively present to him, that it possesses objective immediate existence for him. The State is the Divine Idea as it exists on earth".

---

## 14.7 THEORY OF FREEDOM OF THE INDIVIDUAL

---

Hegel's theory of state leads us to another important conclusion. Because only the state knows what is in individual's interest and because the state is always infallible and because the state is divine therefore the individuals have no rights outside the state or against the state because state itself is the fountain of rights. Freedom of the individual lies in the complete obedience of the laws of the state. It is only as an obedient citizen with the universal. In other words, state is a super-organism in which no one has any individual preferences different from those of the larger unit. Thus, one aspect of Hegel's philosophy which is of greatest significance is the exaltation of the state and complete negation of the individual's rights and freedoms. Real freedom of the individual can be realised only in the state. The only way for the individual to be free is to willingly obey the laws of the state.

In a subtle sense, Hegel's position on the question of relationship between state and individual is very close to Rousseau's position. You will recall that Rousseau had argued that each individual has two wills—actual will which is selfish and the real will which is rational. Freedom in Rousseau's philosophy means subordination of actual wills to the real wills (the General will). In the same way in Hegel's philosophy the individual is free only if he identifies himself consciously with the laws of the state. Because the state for Hegel is infallible and because it can never be wrong therefore, if there is ever a conflict between individual and the state, the individual is always wrong and the state is always right.

It is also interesting to compare Hegel's position with the position of Hobbes on this (relation between the individual and the state). Hegel maintains that individuals have no right to resist the state or disobey the commands of the state. To take an analogy—just as parts of human body cannot revolt against the body in the same way the individuals cannot revolt against the state. Given this position of Hegel we can say that the Hegelian state is like the Hobbesian Leviathan in new garb. In fact, in Hegel the position of state *vis-à-vis* the individual is more exalted than in Hobbes. Hobbes at least grants to the individual the right to revolt against the state if the state fails to protect his life. The individuals in the Hobbesian social contract agreed to submit themselves to the state in the hope that it (state) will ensure safety of their life and property. If the state (or the sovereign) is unable to do so then the individuals have the inherent right to refuse to obey the sovereign. However, Hegel does not grant any such right to the individual. This is so because the state for Hegel is the embodiment of reason and individuals are the products of the state. In some sense the relationship between state and individual in Hegel is an organic relationship, while in Hobbes it remains a mechanical relationship based on contract.

---

## 14.8 CONCLUSION

---

Hegel is undoubtedly one of the greatest political thinkers of modern times. He is considered to be a pragmatic thinker because he tries to idealise and rationalise the actual existing Prussian State (what is real is rational). With a pronounced Euro-centrism in the background of the Protestant Revolution, he was convinced that Germany in particular and Europe in general have approached the near final form of historical evolution. The German State for him marked the culmination and final destination of Absolute Idea. He attributed to the state not only a distinct personality but also a moral totality. Hegel rejected Kant's notion of perpetual peace and accepting different forms of regimes, accepted war as a mechanism of settling two alternative claims of rights. Hegel had no doctrine of just war.

Hegel's greatest contribution was a new discipline, the philosophy of history, a method of measuring historical evolution with a confidence of inevitable progression. In this, he not only influenced Marx but also Saint-Simon, Comte and Toynbee. His overall intellectual influence extended from Marxism to Existentialism leading to conflicting claims, criticisms and adulation. Karl Popper saw him as a precursor of 20th Century fascism. Kaufmann reacting to Popper said that Hegel was not a radical individualist but certainly not a totalitarian. Both Avineri and Marcuse concurred with Kaufmann. Fukuyama, making a comparison between the continued influence of Marx and Hegel proclaimed the triumph of Hegel, as modern liberalism does not end "the desire for recognition" but transforms "into a more rational form".

The classical tradition ended with Hegel, as MacIntyre observed that no new fundamental innovations have been possible after him. This is reflected by the fact that after Hegel began a period of refinement in political theory. As last of the titans, Hegel's influence continues to be an important ingredient in contemporary political philosophy.

---

## 14.9 SUMMARY

---

Hegel was influenced by Socrates (Dialectics), Aristotle (teleology), Rousseau (actual will and Rational Will) and Immanuel Kant (Rationalism). Secondly, we have noted that Hegel's method is dialectical, In order to arrive at truth a thing must be understood in relation to its opposite. This is process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The third important aspect of Hegel's political is his theory of history. He looks at history as the gradual evolution of the Absolute Idea or the Spirit. History is progress but it moves in violent spirals. The most significant aspect of his Political Philosophy is his theory of the state which is based on the axiom that what is rational is real and what is real is rational. It means that for him all that exist (or all that is real) is rational because it is a part of unfolding of Reason. Similarly, all that is rational must actually exist. He raised the state to the highest pedestal and even called it the march of God on earth. This is so because state is the highest and the final manifestation of Reason or Absolute Idea. The earlier states witnessed in this evolutionary are the following: Inorganic world—organic world—human beings—family and civil society.

By raising the state to such an exalted position he denied any freedom to the individual. He treated the state as an end rather than a means. Since state is Reason personified it is infallible. Individuals can enjoy their freedom only by fully identifying with the state. Therefore, in Hegel's philosophy individuals have no right against the state. State is a whole and individuals are parts that constitute this whole and this whole is larger than the sum total of its parts. As different organs of body can neither exist nor develop in opposition to or outside the body, similarly individuals had no existence apart from and outside the state. State in Hegel's philosophy is like Hobbes' Leviathan. In fact, Hegel goes beyond Hobbes in so far as Hobbes implicitly granted the right to the individual to resist the state but Hegel does not allow any such right to the individual.

Hegel's political philosophy has exercised great influence during the last two centuries. The rise of fascism in Italy and totalitarianism in Soviet Union is attributed to his philosophy. The general swing to the right is said to have drawn inspiration from his philosophy. He glorified war because, in his view, it brings out the noblest qualities of man. He viewed war as an instrument in the hands of world spirits to facilitate the development of world according to the dialectic of history.

---

## 14.10 EXERCISES

---

- 1) What were the major influences on Hegel?
- 2) What did Hegel mean by 'real is rational'?
- 3) What is Hegel's Philosophy of History'?
- 4) Explain the statement 'the State is the March of God on Earth'.
- 5) What are Hegel's views about freedom of the individual'?