

# HEGELIAN IDEALISM: AN OVERVIEW

RANDEEP DHOOT (Assistant Prof.)

DEPT. OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
S.D.ARYA MAHILA COLLEGE, DINANAGAR

EMAIL-[randeep.dhoot@rediffmail.com](mailto:randeep.dhoot@rediffmail.com)

---

**Abstract:** Georg W. Friedrich Hegel was the most self confident philosopher who ever lived. He aimed at nothing less than a complete reconstruction of modern thought. The two main points round which the thought of Hegel centres are the dialectical method and idealisation of the nation state. The dialectic of Hegel is not valueless as a gymnastic, but it is treacherous as an interpretative principle. To him the state is not the final embodiment of world-spirit and is the final stage in the process of social evolution. Hegel turned the edge of the principle of freedom by identifying it with obedience. The motive of this paper is to view the various aspects of his political philosophy and to make an estimate of its implications.

**Keywords:** dialectic, freedom, self-preservation, society, reason.

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hegel has the reputation of being among the most difficult of philosophers. This reputation rests upon the language in which he expresses his thought. He concerns himself with the persistent issues of politics as consent, freedom and authority. His principal preoccupation is with freedom and he regarded his political philosophy as supplying the only valid reconciliation of freedom and authority. Hegel asserted that men are free when they obey the commands of the state. Hegel was one of those young Germans who had enthusiastically welcomed the French revolution. But as things developed under Napoleon, these young Germans had to re-examine their beliefs. Hegel's political philosophy is the most significant fruit of this reaction. According to Hegel freedom is the distinctive quality of man. In his own words, to renounce ones freedom is to renounce ones humanity. Not to be free, therefore, is a renunciation of one's human rights and even of one's duties. This truth he gathered from Rousseau and Kant but he believed that Kantian conception of freedom was negative, limited and subjective on account which the attitude of Kant towards the state was grudging and individualistic. The main point which Hegel emphasises is that civilization is not repressive of individual freedom; that social forces are a medium through which the individual always move and from which he derives the elements even of his individuality; that to be man at all requires participation in the life of some sort of communities; that education and culture are in general a means of liberation.

Hegel's political philosophy is in some ways response to the scepticism of the British thinkers who did not accept reason as an ultimate source of truth and reality. Hegel in his political philosophy emphasized that reason comprehended all reality. He identified all that is or has been with reason. Thus he tried to synthesize in his political philosophy its different aspects and made it all embracing and syncretic. Hegel tried to show that other thinkers had grasped only a part of truth. He did not refute what they wrote about only showed that they had written partial truth. Hegel studied philosophy and history and derived some broad principles from which he developed his political philosophy.

The one principle that he derived was that reason is the ultimate reality. History is the unfoldment of reason in its various shapes. Reason is God. The process of historical evolution is the dialectic. Dialectic means the interaction the conflict of country forces or powers. By its action in the world each force or power gives rise to its opposite. Each thesis generates its anti thesis and out of the conflict between the thesis and anti-thesis, the synthesis is born. The synthesis becomes in its turn the thesis which again generates its antithesis and out of the conflict between thesis and antithesis a new idea is born

and thus the process of evolution goes on till the ultimate stage is realized. According to Hegel the state the final embodiment of reason or spirit on the social plane and nothing short of the state is the actualisation of freedom.

According to Hegel the essential principle of the state is self-preservation and perfection. War is not to be regarded as an evil but a virtue. Hegel says, "The state of war shows the omnipotence of the state in its individuality." War is to national life what winds are to the sea "preserving mankind from the corruption engendered by immobility." War effectively displays the irony of the divine idea. War destroys the selfish egoism of the individual. For Hegel, "peace corrupts and everlasting peace corrupts everlastingly." War is the state of affairs which deals in earnest with the vanity of temporal goods and concerns-a vanity at other times a common theme for edifying sermonizing. War has the highest significance that by its agency the ethical health of people is preserved in their indifference to the stabilizing of finite institutions; just as the blowing of the wind preserves the sea from the foulness which would be the result of a prolonged calm, let alone perpetual peace. Successful wars have prevented civil boils and strengthened the internal power of the state. The various weapons of war were not invented only by chance; they fulfilled an essential purpose. According to Hegel, "Guns and gun power bear the stamp of civilization. The rights of uncivilized people are a mere formality. The civilized nation is conscious that the rights of barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy as only a formality."

To Hegel the nation state was the most rational thing. It was the expression of a higher rationality that could be achieved by the individual, or by any private group or corporation. The state was omnipotent and absolute, supreme and sovereign. Naturally, therefore the state is bound by no principles of international law. International law represents only certain usages which were accepted so long as these did not conflict with the supreme performance of the state. The other nations have no right against another state. In the words of Hegel, "A state is not a private person, but in itself a completely independent totality. Hence the relations of one state to another is not merely that of morality and private right. It is often desired that the state should be regarded from the standpoint of private right and morality. But the position of private person is such that they have over them a law court, which realises what is intrinsically right. A relation between states also ought to be intrinsically right, but in mundane affairs that which is intrinsically right ought to have power. But as against the state there is no power to decide what is intrinsically right and to realise that decision. The interest of the state is the supreme law. It is not bound by any principles of international law. States in their relations to one another are independent and look upon the stipulations which they make with one another as provisional." Naturally, a thinker who believes in war and regards it a virtuous activity cannot be expected to believe in any principles of international law.

But it is wrong to presume that Hegel did not look beyond the nation-state. To him, nation state was only a step, but a necessary step in the evolution of humanity towards a world state. It is only when the nations have developed to their full maturity that they can march towards the ideas of world-state. But Hegel did not write much about the world state. The idea of world state was too abstract for him to speculate.

According to Hegel, the state manifests itself in a constitution. The three important powers in the state are legislative, administrative and monarchic. Out of these powers, the monarchic power is the most important. Hegel made this division of powers according to the formula of his dialectic. According to him, the legislative branch, which stands for the universal aspect of the state, is the thesis; the administrative organ representing its particular aspect is the antithesis; and the constitutional monarch who may be regarded as their unity in the individual state is the synthesis. Hegel includes the judicial organ in the administrative branch. The constitutional monarch is the medium through which the legislative and the executive are brought into a harmonious unity. The sovereignty of the state resides in the monarch and not in the mass of the people. Being constitutional the monarch can be no autocrat; he is bound to the concrete content of the advice of his councillors, and when the constitution is established, he has often nothing to do but sign his name. In accordance with his dialectic Hegel has tried to show that the completely rational state must not only be a monarchy, but a constitutional monarchy. However, Hegel disliked parliamentary institutions of British type. According to him, what needs representation is not the individuals but interests or functional units of society. He favoured the functional system of representation.

Though Hegel was influenced by the philosophy of Kant but he modified it to suit the conditions of his day. Like Kant he based his system upon a spiritual idea, but his method was different from that of Kant. While Kant followed the deductive method, Hegel's method was historical and evolutionary. If we examine Hegel's philosophy, we would find that he reaffirms the Greek view that man rises to his full stature only in the state which completes the training in public spirit supplied at the lower level by the family and civil society. His real aim was to restore national unity to Germany which

had suffered humiliation at the hands of France. State's own preservation was the first end to be kept in view before the individuals could claim any freedom for themselves. Freedom to Hegel was something positive, and not merely a negative absence of restraints.

No one can probably object to this view of philosophy but when he cast his arguments in the rigid mould of the dialectic, he opened himself to serious pitfalls. To Hegel, dialectic was a law of logic, and indeed an iron law, leaving little or nothing to chance or even to conscious to human volition. To Hegel civil society is the antithesis of family. Hegel has reduced individual wishes and preferences to the level of mere caprice. The actors in human history for him are not men but impersonal forces. As Lancaster remarks, "While Hegel's emphasis on the transcendence of the individual was a useful corrective to the extreme atomism of the Enlightenment he carries it to the point where individual values disappear entirely."

The most significant aspect of Hegel's philosophy is his exaltation of the state. He makes the individual not only a member of society but makes him the subject of a state which being the final embodiment of world spirit is supreme and omnipotent. The moral superiority of the state consists not the fact that it is a means to meet the needs of man but in the fact that it is an end in itself, representing the supreme achievement of Reason in human affairs and being the absolutely rational the actuality of the ethical Idea, "the march of God on earth." Hegel's state stands so far above the individual that the latter has significance only as material upon which spirit works it will. The individual conscience is not to be trusted; the commands of the state are the spokesmen of infallible morality. To raise the state above all moral criticism was to contribute decisively to a disastrous worship of power.

It may be pointed out that Hegel's conception of the state is not a static one. It describes the state as a relative organisation expressing at each stage of its development the degree of rationality at which mankind has arrived. This means that Hegel's theory of state admits the necessity of growth. In short, Hegel gave a new emphasis and importance to the state. He called it a new, higher and more rational level of reality. He corrected the flaws in theory of individualism which ignored the social character of a man. Hegel showed that man is influenced by society. He regarded the police state as inadequate and made law something more than mere command. He viewed the state as part of the moral end of man. Hegel's view of state never made an appeal to the English men. It is of course such a contradiction of their traditional, political thinking and such a condemnation of their most popular political practices that they have tended to regard it as something that is dangerous and that ought to be abolished. Few of us, moreover could agree that the state is the chosen representative of God, even though we recognise the great importance of the part it has played in bringing about the order which is necessary for all intellectual development for the state has not been the sole factor in furthering this growth of rationality.

## 2. CONCLUSION

However, Hegel's teaching is valuable too. It insists on man's dependence on society. Individualism ignores the social character of man. Hegel emphasized on the social aspect of man's nature. He made the idea of liberty richer by showing that man's conception of it largely depends upon the institutions which have trained him and given him his education. He emphasized that the state is not a police state, instead it must be regarded as part of man's moral end. Hegel's philosophy led the English idealists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to revise liberalism and rid it of its abstraction which had viewed the individual as a solitary and pleasure seeking animal.

Hegel's theory gave rise to the sociological theory of politics, because he showed that political power was connected with the economic, social and cultural forces in the state. He gave a new emphasis and importance to the state and greatly enriched modern political philosophy. He grasped the connection between morals and politics and handled the same with a far greater insight than any of his predecessors. According to Prof. Sabine, "The philosophy of Hegel aimed at nothing less than a complete and systematic reconstruction of modern thought." He set forth a new intellectual method, the dialectic, which should bridge the gulf between reason, fact and value. In his political theory he set a value on the national state and its place in history. The social philosophy of Hegel had a direct and intimate relation to the national history of Germany. According to Maxey, "It will be many years before the full influence of Hegel's political thought can be measured. His contribution to the warring ideologies represented on the one side by Lenin and Stalin and on the other by Mussolini and Hitler, constitutes but one part of his significance, and is no more paradoxical than his influence in other directions. Both his views and his methodology have deeply affected the social sciences." Divergent streams of thought have also flowed from Hegel's subordination of the whole of civil society to the state. Liberals, seeking an escape from

the nihilistic individualism of laissez faire have found in the Hegelian conception of the state a plausible basis of programmes of reform carried on by state action. Conservatives, on the other hand, have found the same concept suitable to the support of their interest in the promotion of economic nationalism.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] G.H.Sabine, A History of Political Theory,(USA),1941.
- [2] J.H.Hallowell, Main Currents in Modern Political Thought.
- [3] Hegel, Philosophy of Rights(Knox trans).
- [4] G.Catlin, A Histiroy of Political Philosophies(London).
- [5] A.D.Lindsay in Social and Political ideas of the age of Reaction and Reconstruction.
- [6] L.W.Lancaster, Masters of Political Thought, vol.III(1959),London.
- [7] W.Ebenstein, Great Political Thinkers- Plato to the Present, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition(New York),1962.
- [8] Hegel, lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, translated by R.F.Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M.Steward. vol. 3, University of California Press.
- [9] The Phenomenology of Spirit,by A.V.Miller,Oxford University Press.
- [10] Hegel, 1995,lectures on the history of philosophy; vol.III medieval and modern philosophy.