

THE HUMANISM OF HEGELIAN PHILOSOPHY

or

ADVENTURES OF THE HEGELIAN DIALECTIC

I

The Humanism of Hegel is not the most obvious element in the Hegelian philosophy, although it is its innermost essence. That academic tradition that operates on Prof. Wildebrand's assumption that the generation that could understand Hegel's PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND has died cannot help the youth of our epoch grasp the grandeur of the vision of the most encyclopaedic mind of Europe who nevertheless wrote:

"Within the short span of man's own life an individual must learn the whole long journey of mankind. This is possible only because the universal mind is operative in every individual mind and is the very substance of it."

It would seem that if you, we, everyone have to learn all of civilization in one's own lifetime and that that be but the preliminary for adding his own dimension to future man's history, then it would look like we all had to be geniuses. Not so, says Hegel. We have the advantage of living in an age where "What in former days occupied the energies of man of mature mental ability, sinks to the level of information. In this educational progress we can see the history of the world's civilization delineated in faint outline."

And indeed, what schoolboy doesn't know more about geography than the discovery of America? What about the law of gravity? You can name thousands more of such examples. Good, so we start on a pretty high level - and the YOUTH PARTICULARLY have absorbed in them 5000 years of Western Civilization by just being born today.

It is true that Hegel himself threw a mystical veil over his philosophy by treating it as a closed ontological system, but he also warned against those who become the self-styled "representatives" of a philosophical work who, he said, "are like the dead burying the dead". He put his own faith in the public, instead, not alone because of its modesty but because, "it is the nature of truth to force its way to recognition when the time comes."

II. - THE TIME IS NOW

That the time is NOW is heralded by the fact that we are the ones who live in what I call the age of absolutes - on the threshold of absolute freedom out of the struggle against absolute tyranny.

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Under the pretense of separating "the mysticism" of Hegel from the "materialism" of Marx the Russians are perverting both Marx and Hegel. Because they recognize the so-called mystical Absolute, "the negation of the negation" as the revolution against themselves, Hegel remains so alive and worrisome to the Russian rulers today. One thing they sense correctly - and this we can do well to learn from the enemy - HEGEL'S CONCEPT OF THE ABSOLUTE AND THE INTERNATIONAL STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM ARE NOT SO FAR APART AS WOULD SEEM ON THE SURFACE. The Ideal and the Real are never far apart.

"In my view", Hegel wrote, "everything depends on grasping the ultimate truth not only as Substance but as Subject as well." Now to grasp something, whether in society, in history, in the sciences, or the experiences of the individual not as substance alone, that is, dead, impenetrable matter but subject, that is living, moving, its self-development - means to see the human beings themselves.

It is true that Hegel himself treated objective history as if that were the development of some world-spirit, and treated the self-development of mind as if the head could indeed be disjoined from the body and the brains float somewhere between heaven and earth in a self-development of its own, the truth is that he had his pulse on HUMAN history, both present and past and indeed this bond of continuity of present and past in which you also see the elements of the future is the mainspring of the dialectic.

All we have to do to embark on this "voyage of discovery" as he called his PHENOMENOLOGY is to treat Hegel himself as a living human being, a product of the times in which he lived - the period of the French Revolution and Napoleon. There can be no doubt at all about the impact of the French Revolution on Hegel, nor can there be any question of the impact upon him of the division of labor and the subjugation of the worker to the machine which had been given such impetus by the industrial development following the Revolution.

I do not believe there is a more dramatic moment in intellectual history than that where the young Hegel, having described this phenomenon of alienated labor under capitalism, turned away from it never to return to - in this form. Comparative recent discoveries have uncovered that First System and we can see Hegel before he escaped to his ivory tower and see that Hegel's description is indeed reminiscent of Marx:

"The more mechanized labor becomes, the less value it has and the more the individual must toil...The value of labor decreases in the same proportion as the productivity of labor increases... The faculties of the individual are infinitely restricted and the consciousness of the factory worker is degraded to the lowest level of dullness."

Marx caught this revolutionary impact, although he knew nothing of this writing, from what was published PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND, FOR even when Hegel's central theme of alienation was abstracted from the productive system you could not help feel the impact of what he called "the birth-time of history and transition" and the HUMAN element of Lordship and Bondage where the bondsman gains what Hegel described as "a mind of his own" and thus stands higher than the lord, who lives in luxury, does not labor, and therefore cannot really gain true freedom.

Freedom is something one gets by overcoming bondage and/ⁱⁿthe process of acquiring freedom, man gets to know all his TRUE POTENTIALITIES. As Herbert Marcuse put it in his work on Marx and Hegel called REASON AND REVOLUTION: "Freedom presupposes conditions that render freedom possible, namely conscious and rational mastery of the world."

Freedom is the animating spirit, the "Subject" of Hegel's greatest works. All of history, to Hegel, is a series of historical stages in the development of freedom. THIS IS WHAT MAKES HIM SO CONTEMPORARY. Freedom is not only his point of departure. It is ^{in part} return.

III. THE REVOLUTIONARY PRINCIPLE OF HEGEL

In one respect I agree with Charles A. Beard who had written that it is not Marx's standing Hegel right side up that created the revolutionary element in the Hegelian method. As everyone knows who has ever looked at Hegel - the dialectic method he made so famous is a dynamic analysis of development - any development, whether in nature, in thought, in society. The French Revolution certainly had illuminated the fact that the overcoming of opposites is not a single act but a constantly developing process, a development through a contradiction. It is through the struggle of the opposites that the movement of humanity is propelled forward. As Hegel formulated it in his PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: it was not so much from as through slavery that man acquired freedom.

Whether, as with Hegel, Christianity is taken as the point of departure, or whether - as with Marx - the point of departure is the material condition for freedom created by the Industrial Revolution, the essential element is this: man has to fight to gain freedom; thereby is revealed ~~THE PRINCIPLE OF NEGATIVITY~~ "negative character" of modern society.

Now THE PRINCIPLE OF NEGATIVITY was not Marx's discovery - he merely named it "the living worker" - the discovery of the principle was Hegel's.

Hegel deals with abstract thought. But one need only give the historical names to the mythological struggles which he describes between consciousness-in-itself and the consciousness-for-itself to see that for every stage in the development of thought there is a corresponding stage in the development of the world. As I put it in MARKISM AND FREEDOM:

(footnote 11, pp. 356-57) "Who hasn't seen the 'Alienated Soul' or 'Unhappy Consciousness' among his restless friends and tired radicals who cannot find a place for themselves in or out of the bourgeois fold, fall into 'a giddy whirl of self-perpetuating disorder', and land on the green couch? Who hasn't seen 'the true and virtuous' among the labor bureaucrats turning away from reality 'in a frenzy of self-conceit' because they have given their 'all' for the workers only to be repaid in wildcats? Indeed the Phenomenology contains both the tragedy of our times and its comedy."

The fact that REASON itself turns to PRACTICAL ACTIVITY - and Practice in Hegel's theory stands higher than the "Idea" of Cognition because as he puts it "it has not only the dignity of the universal, but is the simply actual" - to realize her aims and in the end Spirit itself finds that it no longer is antagonistic to the world but is indeed the indwelling spirit of the community shows how thoroughly Hegel had broken with the whole tendency of introversion which characterized German idealist philosophy. Where all other philosophers put the realization of truth and freedom in the soul, or in heaven, Hegel drew his into philosophy. No interpreters did that "for" him; he did this himself.

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This genius achieved the seemingly impossible. Because to him there was one Reason, and one Reason only - whether he called it "World Spirit" or "Absolute Mind" it was the actuality of freedom - he succeeded in breaking down the division between the finite and infinite, the human and divine. His LOGIC moves. Each of the previously inseparable divisions between opposites - between thought and reality - is in constant process of change, disappearance, reappearance, coming into head-on collision with its opposite and developing thereby. It is thus, and thus along, says Hegel, that man finally achieves true freedom not as a possession but as a dimension of his being. Nothing can substitute for Hegel's words. Listen then to Hegel in PHILOSOPHY OF MIND:

"When individuals and nations have once got in their heads the abstract concept of full-blown liberty, there is nothing like it in its uncontrollable strength, just because it is the very essence of mind, and that as its very actuality. Whole continents, Africa and the East, have never had this idea, and are without it still. The Greeks and Romans, Plato and Aristotle, even the Stoics, did not have it. On the contrary, they saw that it is only by birth

(as e.g. an Athenian or Spartan citizen), or by strength of character, education, or philosophy (--the sage is free even as a slave and in chains) that the human being is actually free. It was through Christianity that this idea came into the world."

"If to be aware of the idea - to be aware, i.e. that men are aware of freedom as their essence, aim, and object - is matter of speculation, still this very idea itself is the actuality of men - not something they have, as men, but which they are."]

He separated himself completely from those to whom the road to the Absolute was like a shot out of a pistol. "It is certainly possible to indulge in a vast amount of senseless declamations about the idea absolute," he warned, "but the true content is only the whole system of which we have been hitherto studying the development."

It is true that the categories of his Logic, such as "Being and Becoming", "Appearance and Essence", "Necessity and Freedom" do not, as Hegel imagined, have eternal existence, independent of man. It is here Marx stood him right-side up, that is, on his feet, instead of on his head, pointing out that these categories were actuality, the reflection in man's mind of the process going on in the material world.

"It is not the consciousness of man that determines their existence," Marx had written, "but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." But Hegel, too, was not content merely to affirm the dialectical principle of self-movement and self-activity through opposition. He examined all of human history in this light. His patient tracing of the specific forms of the creating and overcoming of opposites is a landmark that has never been equalled.

It is true Hegel worked out all the contradictions in thought alone. In life all contradictions remained, multiplied, intensified. It would, however, be a complete misreading of his philosophy were we to think that ~~his~~ his Absolute is either a mere reflection of the separation between the intellectual world and the world of material production or that the Absolute is the empty absolute of intuitivists from Jacobi through Fichte to Schelling. His Absolute is the vision of the future. Hegel's pre-supposition, as we saw, ~~was~~ the infinite capacities of the human being. He envisions a society where man realizes all of his human potentialities and thus achieves consciously what the realm of nature achieves through blind necessity. Translated materialistically, it means that there is a movement from practice to theory as well as from theory to practice. The truth is the unity of the two, as we can see whether we take the PHENOMENOLOGY OF MIND, THE SCIENCE OF LOGIC, AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND separately or as a whole. The Humanism of Hegel can be seen from his very description of the Doctrine of the Notion as "the realm of Subjectivity OR of Freedom". (Vol. II, P. 205).